



The Kenai River

About the Kenai

The Kenai River is the most heavily-fished river in Alaska. In recent years, an average of 275,000 angler-days of participation have been recorded. An angler-day is one person fishing for any part of a day.

The Kenai is a glacial stream draining the central Kenai Peninsula. Kenai Lake narrows into Kenai River near the community of Cooper Landing. It meanders through slack water for approximately 6 miles, crossing gravel riffles before narrowing again into a stream of greater, yet still gentle, gradient. This continues for about another 6 miles before tumbling through the “Kenai Canyon”: two miles of fast river with whitewater enough to excite even experienced floaters and kayakers. Kenai Canyon is not recommended for the novice. Below the Canyon, the river continues in a more gentle fashion for about 3 more miles to Skilak Lake. There are 17.3 river miles from Kenai Lake to Skilak Lake, and this stretch of river is commonly called the “Upper River.”

After leaving Skilak Lake, the river travels for 10.5 miles at a gradient of 3.3 ft/mi before encountering Naptowne Rapids. These rapids are about 1 mile long on a slightly greater gradient, contain many large rocks, and only experienced boat operators using a powered craft 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, typically called the “Mid-River” section, is 19.5 miles in length with a gradient of 5.4 ft/mi, and is not dangerous to negotiate if caution is maintained.

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



A lucky Kenai angler with a nice-sized king salmon.

The Sterling Highway bridge in Soldotna marks the beginning of the “Lower River.” This final 21-mile section is gentler, and the river winds its way to empty in Cook Inlet near the city of Kenai. The final 12 miles of this section are tidally-influenced.

There are about 40 unique species of fish in the Kenai River. There are resident fish, which spend their entire life cycle in the river; “anadromous” fish, which spend part of their life in the river and part in salt water; and fish which are common to the intertidal area, which is a mixture of both fresh and salt water.

Alaska’s sport fishing regulations

The Kenai River regulations can be found in the Southcentral Alaska regulation summary booklet, available free of charge wherever sport fishing licenses are sold, at ADF&G offices, or online at www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us. Click on “Regulations.”

Be sure to read all regulations covering the type of fishery you are interested in. **If you have any questions, please contact**

Kenai River Habitat Management Plan

The banks of the Kenai River are crucial to the long term health of the fish and the river. Trampled and eroded riverbanks are a certain way to reduce the fish population.

Since 1996, ADF&G Sport Fish has conducted a study to evaluate shore angler impacts to Kenai River riparian habitat. The Board of Fisheries recognizes the importance of maintaining the structural and functional integrity of upper Cook Inlet riparian habitats, and directs the Commissioner of Fish and Game to close, by emergency order, public lands where habitat loss could negatively affect the fishery resource.

Vegetation slows runoff and erosion, provides cover for juvenile fish, cools the water, and slows the current. Do your part to preserve the Kenai River for generations to come.

- ❖ Do not cut brush or trees within 10 feet of the waterline.
- ❖ Use established trails to reach the river, and established entry and exit points.
- ❖ Stand in the river, away from fragile shoreline 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.



Significant bank loss.

the Southcentral Region Sport Fish Information Center at (907) 267-2218 (Anchorage) or by e-mail to sfreg2@fishgame.state.ak.us

Emergency Orders

The Department of Fish and Game may open, close, or otherwise modify any fishery at any time during times of biological need. Emergency Orders usually affect Kenai River king (Chinook) salmon, Kenai River and Russian River red (sockeye) salmon, and Kenai River silver (coho) salmon.

In the event of an Emergency Order, the public is notified through news media as well as through the ADF&G Southcentral Region Emergency Order/News Release website at www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us, click on "Emergency Orders and News."

Weekly fishing reports

In season fishing reports are posted under "Fishing Reports" on the Southcentral Region website at www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us They are also recorded on an Anchorage telephone hotline at (907) 267-2510, and on a Soldotna telephone hotline at (907) 262-2737.

Guides, charters, accommodations

Kenai River guides must have a commercial permit issued by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. A list of permitted Kenai River 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.

For accommodations, the Kenai Peninsula Tourism Marketing Council has a helpful list of links to area chambers of commerce and visitor's centers at www.kenaipeninsula.org, 35477 Kenai Spur Highway, Suite 205, Soldotna, Alaska 99669, e-mail info@kenaipeninsula.org, (907) 262-5229.

There are numerous state and federal campgrounds along the Kenai River drainage. State facilities are managed by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources' Division of Parks and Recreation. Their website is www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks, or contact them at P.O. Box 1247, Soldotna, Alaska 99669, (907) 262-5581.

Federal facilities are managed by either the U.S. Forest Service or the U.S.F.W.S. Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Information can be found at www.reserveusa.com



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

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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.

For information on alternative formats for this and other department publications, please contact the department ADA Coordinator at (voice) 907-465-6077, (TDD) 907-465-3646, or (FAX) 907-465-6078.

Kenai River sonar programs

Both of the king salmon runs, as well as the late red salmon run are measured by state-of-the-art sonar equipment. The king salmon sonar site is operated by the Division of Sport Fish, and is established at river mile 8.6. The red salmon sonar site is operated by the Division of Commercial Fisheries, and is located at river mile 19.5.

Side-looking sonar has been used to assess king salmon returns to the Kenai River since 1987. Sampling on both banks is controlled by electronics housed in a tent located on the north bank of the river. Cables to the south bank electronics are suspended over the river. To insonify the river, an elliptical transducer is mounted in the side-looking position on each bank. Vertical and horizontal aiming of each transducer is remotely controlled by a dual-axis electronic pan and tilt system.

Data from returned echoes is verified and manually tracked on-site using specialized software that allows fish echoes to be displayed on a grid, and subsequently classified into individual fish traces.

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, giant king salmon, or boat propeller. Boat wakes and dragging boat anchors can sometimes cause the equipment to either under- or over-count, both of which negatively impact your sport fishery. Obey the traffic signs near the sonar sites to avoid trouble.

Sonar estimates are available on our website at www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us, and click on "Fish Counts." More information about the king salmon sonar program can be found at www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/Region2/sonar/sonar.cfm



Kenai River king salmon

The Kenai River hosts the busiest freshwater king (Chinook) salmon fishery in Alaska. In the 1990s, 50,000 to 115,000 angler-days per year were recorded. Between 7,000 and 30,000 fish were harvested. The average is about 17,500 kings. The first king salmon is caught in mid- to late May.

The world's record rod and reel king was taken in 1985 from the Kenai River, and weighed in at 97 lb.-4 oz. However, not all Kenai River king salmon are that large. Most Kenai Peninsula king salmon spend one year in fresh water, then migrate to sea when they are about 4" long. The length of time in salt water, how much food they find, and the genetic composition of the fish all help to determine their final size.

No one knows why king salmon return at different ages. Some kings return after only one year in salt water. These fish weigh only a few pounds, are almost always fertile males. Others return after two years and weigh 10-20 pounds. Most of these, too, are male. The majority of Southcentral kings return after three and four years at sea, and weigh 25-60 pounds.

King salmon of the same age will also vary in size from

stream to stream, perhaps due to genetics. A "four-ocean" fish in lower 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.

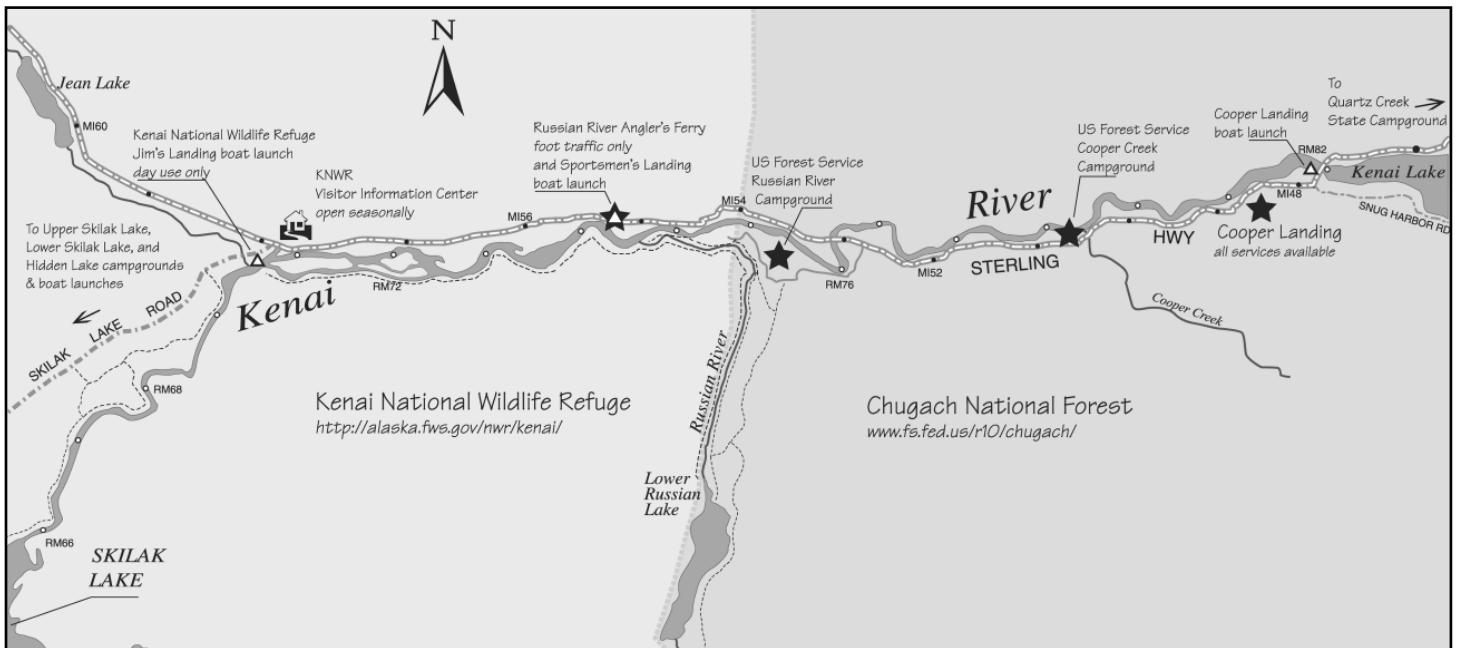
Although it's rare in Southcentral Alaska to catch king salmon that have remained at sea five years, in the Kenai River a "five-ocean" fish is reasonably likely to be caught. The world record fish caught in 1985 spent one year in fresh water, five years in salt water and returned in its seventh year of life.

King salmon run timing

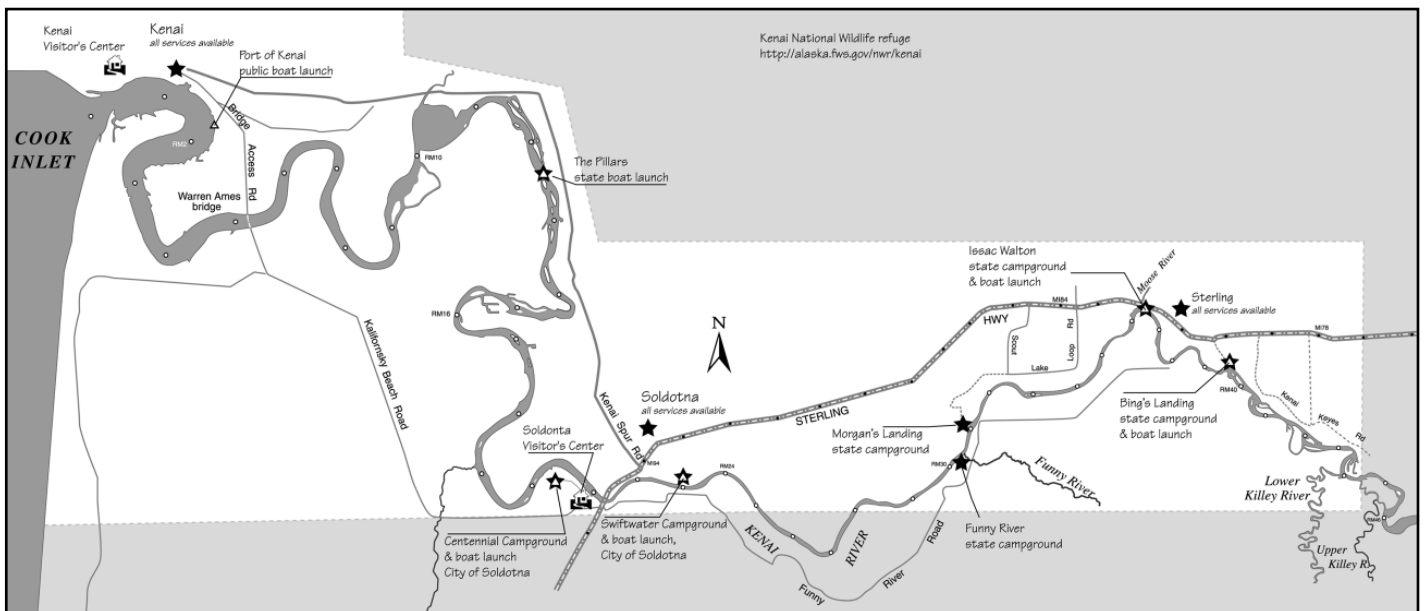
The Kenai River supports two distinct king salmon runs. The early run usually enters the river in mid-May. Early-run fishing peaks in mid-June, and is over by the end of June. In recent years, the early run population has fluctuated widely, from as few as 8,100 to as many as 16,000 (including harvested fish). The early run fish primarily head for smaller Kenai River tributaries.

Late-run fish enter the river in early July, with the best fishing found from mid- to late July. There are usually more fish in the late run, with a total population averaging 56,000

The “Upper” Kenai River from Kenai Lake downstream to Skilak Lake



The “Lower” Kenai River from Skilak Lake downstream to the mouth



In July and August, selected sections of the banks along the Kenai River are closed to fishing within 10 feet of either side of the waterline, in order to protect fragile fish habitat. These sections are listed in the Southcentral Alaska regulation booklet. Certain sections of the Kenai River are drift-only, and certain sections have boat motor horsepower limits. The boat motor limits are also listed in the booklet.

(including harvested fish). Late run fish spawn primarily in the mainstem Kenai River.

Management of the Kenai River king salmon sport fishery

Both king salmon runs are intensively and conservatively managed by the Division of Sport Fish under management plans given to the Division by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Special restrictions on bait, tackle, and harvestable sizes apply to both runs.

The Division of Sport Fish uses the best technologies and most accurate methods available to estimate both the run strength and the spawning escapement of Kenai River kings.

The Division primarily relies on two methods to estimate run strength: 1) the in-river sonar program, and 2) an in-sea-

son creel census—fishery technicians interviewing anglers on the Kenai. The Division then estimates the spawning escapement—how many fish have escaped harvest—by subtracting the creel census figure from the number of king salmon going through the sonar counter.

In order to ensure accuracy, additional measurements of run strength—harvest in the commercial fishery, offshore test fishing, test net catches in the river, and angler success rates, among other methods—are also used.

Popular king salmon fishing techniques

Three techniques are popular with king salmon anglers. Each technique takes advantage of the fact that king salmon travel deep, through the center of the river channel. Shore anglers are at a slight disadvantage when fishing for Kenai River king salmon.



If the fish are to be kept in the water before release, here's a legal way for shore anglers to get a photo of their great catch.



When fishing from a boat, here's a way to keep the fish in the water while removing the hook.

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:

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 hook, 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.

Boat drifting is the easiest and most popular method. Anglers drift with the current, allowing the lure to bounce along the bottom at the speed of the current.

“Back bouncing” is very popular. The boat is constantly under power and slowly backed down the river. As the boat backs through a hole or drift, the angler bounces the lure along the bottom of the river.

“Back trolling” usually involves the use of a plug of the flatfish variety, such as a Kwikfish™. A planer is attached

ahead of the lure to take the lure to the bottom of the river. The boat is usually held in the current by the motor or is allowed to back slowly downstream under power.

The most common rig for drifting and backbouncing 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.

Kenai River public shoreline access sites.

Note: Fees may be charged at some of these sites. There are also many private facilities; contact the appropriate Chamber of Commerce or visitor’s information center.

RM 0	Surf-casting off the sandy beaches at mouth of the Kenai River. A popular resident-only net 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.		
RM 5	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.		
RM 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.		
RM 12.5	Boat launching at the DNR-State Parks’ Pillars Boat Launch, Mile 4.2 of the Kenai Spur Highway.		
RM 20.5	River bank fishing, camping, picnic area, 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.		
RM 21	River bank fishing and picnic area at the Soldotna Visitor’s Center boardwalks, off the Sterling Highway, just south of the bridge. Steps to river.		
RM 23	River bank fishing, camping, picnic area, and boat launch at the City of Soldotna’s Swiftwater Campground, off East Redoubt Ave. near the intersection of the Sterling and Kenai Spur highways.		
RM 30.5	River bank fishing, camping, picnic area at the DNR-State Parks’ Funny River State Recreation Site, at Mile 12 of the Funny River Road.		
RM 31	River bank 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.		
RM 36.5	River bank 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.		
RM 39.5	River bank fishing, boat launch, camping, and picnic		area at DNR-State Parks’ Bing’s Landing State Recreation Site, at Mile 80.5 of the Sterling Highway.
		Skilak	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.
		RM 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.
		RM 71	River bank 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.
		RM 73.5	Boat launching (and river bank 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.
		RM 73.5	River bank 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.
		RM 79	River bank fishing and camping at the U.S. Forest Service’s Cooper Creek Campground, Mile 50.7 of the Sterling Highway, just past Cooper Landing.
		RM 82	River bank 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 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 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.

Much depends on the skill of the boat operator. Because there are a lot of boats on the Kenai, we suggest that the boat operator concentrate only on safe boat operation.

The Kenai River king 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 for a “fish on” is a raised landing net. Give those boats the widest berth possible.

On the average it requires about 29 hours of fishing before an angler boats a king. You can improve your chances by hiring a guide, especially if you are either a novice angler or an experienced angler with little time to spend and/or you lack suitable equipment. On the Kenai River, guided anglers are about twice as efficient as non-guided anglers.

Kenai River red salmon

Run Timing

Although there are two runs of red (sockeye) salmon to the Kenai, early run reds do not present much opportunity for the Kenai River sport angler. It’s a small run, and it’s headed straight for the Russian River drainage. Ask for the Kenai Peninsula Recreational Fishing Series publication “Russian River” to find out more information about this run.

Kenai River late-run sockeye salmon enter the lower Kenai in early July, peak in late July, and are generally complete by early to mid-August. Most fish arrive during the last two weeks of July. The peak of the run generally lasts 7-10 days, and at the peak of a good run, it is not uncommon to see sonar estimates of greater than 20,000 fish per day. Average total return of Kenai River late-run sockeye salmon is about 1 million sockeye (including harvested fish).

These fish are headed for many streams throughout the area, as well as the Russian River, the mainstem of the upper

Kenai River, and Kenai Lake.

The late run hits the upper Kenai/Russian River confluence area from about July 20 through the close of the Russian River sockeye salmon season. About 16% of the total Kenai run heads toward the Russian River. Average length is 18.5 inches. Midpoint of the late sockeye run in the Russian River area is near August 6. It is not uncommon to see over 1,000 anglers fishing the confluence area during the peak of the run.

Kenai River red salmon fishery management

Both sockeye runs are intensively managed by the Division of Commercial Fisheries and by the Division of Sport Fish under management plans given to us by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Special restrictions on bait and tackle apply to both runs, including special sections of the Kenai River that are fly-fishing-only. Check the regulation booklet before going fishing.

Tackle and fishing methods

Most Kenai River sockeye anglers use a streamer or “Russian River Coho” fly, although some claim that the “Green Lantern,” “Comet,” or any shrimp pattern all outperform the popular streamers. Also popular are red hooks with a bit of yarn tied on them. Weights are used to get the fly close to the bottom. The fly is cast 10-15 ft. out 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 procedure repeated.

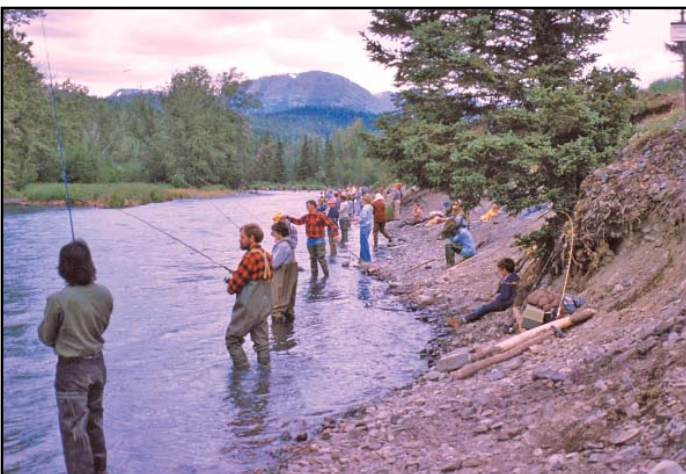
The most productive fishing areas are pools immediately downstream from shallow riffles, and the mainstem close to shore. Sockeye tend to hold in these areas before migrating through the riffles.

Since this species travels so close to shore, most red salmon fishing takes place from the bank. Inexperienced red salmon anglers often wade or cast too far out, not realizing the fish are often swimming right behind them.

Kenai River silver salmon

Although tradition holds that there are two runs of silver (coho) salmon to the Kenai, there are actually several periods of in-migration. The earlier fish arrive in late July, with more fish arriving early to mid-August through early October. About 41,000 silvers are harvested by sport anglers every year.

Most anglers will motor 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 a Mepps™, Pixee™, or Vibrax™ lure. Since silvers use the entire river to travel through, there are many more bank areas that are



The Kenai River at the Russian River confluence area, upstream of the ferry.

productive for silver salmon than there are for king salmon. Many guides offer silver salmon charters.

Kenai River pink salmon

Because of their two-year lifecycle, pink salmon numbers are highest in even-numbered years: 2006, 2008, 2010, etc. Young and novice anglers favor pinks because of this species' large numbers and aggressiveness towards almost any lure. Pinks 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 Cunningham Park, in the city of Kenai.

Although pink salmon age very rapidly after entering fresh water, pinks are truly excellent table fare if they're caught while fresh in the lower river, and cooked right away. Try them on the grill. This species is found in the Kenai from late July through mid-August.

Kenai River rainbow/steelhead trout

The upper Kenai River is home to trophy-sized wild rainbow trout, and "off-season" fishing is a fly angler's dream. The majority of Kenai River rainbow trout are year-round residents of the Kenai River, although small numbers of steelhead have documented by the Division of Sport Fish. About 43,000 rainbow/steelhead are caught every year by anglers. Ninety-five percent of these fish are released.

Most rainbow trout fishing occurs from the Moose River upstream to Skilak Lake, and in the upper Kenai, from Skilak upstream to Kenai Lake. Wet flies, streamer flies, spinning lures, and patterns imitating shrimp or salmon roe are popular. Best time is often in late fall, even early winter, after all the "salmon madness" has left the river, and trout are feeding on salmon carcasses and eggs. Try just downstream from a riffle area.

Kenai River rainbow trout management

Special conservative tackle and seasons apply. **Check the regulations closely before fishing for rainbow trout.**

Kenai River Dolly Varden

The Kenai River is assumed to have populations of both resident and ocean-going Dolly Varden. Resident Dollies are probably 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, and from the inlet of Skilak Lake upstream to Kenai Lake. Special tackle restrictions apply: check the regulation book carefully.

Anadromous Dolly Varden enter the river in early July, with the run continuing into September. These fish spawn in the fall and overwinter in the Kenai and Skilak lakes before heading back out to sea in April. Anglers intercept them in the lower river from mid- to late July.

Like rainbow trout, Dolly Varden are conservatively managed.

Lake trout in Kenai & 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 of the 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 or at the lake outlets, and it is at these times that most fish are harvested. About 3,300 fish are harvested every year.

Kenai River area northern pike

In the 1970s, northern pike were illegally introduced into Derks Lake near Soldotna. Since then they have spread throughout the Soldotna Creek drainage and have been found in other Kenai Peninsula waterways.

As a result of the illegal stocking, the numbers of native rainbow trout and Dolly Varden in the Soldotna Creek drainage have reportedly declined.

Northern pike in this area support a small fishery, with the season open throughout the year. Pike anglers enjoy more liberal gear and open season regulations than salmon or trout anglers.

For information about camping, accommodations, fishing guides, and other visitor services, contact the agencies listed in this publication, or the Alaska Travel Industry Association at 2600 Cordova Street, Suite 201, Anchorage, Alaska, 99503
web: www.travelalaska.com email: info@AlaskaTIA.org



Recreational Fishing Series produced by

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