

Marine salmon fishing

➤ **KING SALMON** This highly prized sport fishing species is one of the least abundant salmon species in northern Southeast Alaska, but grows the largest and is a powerful, enduring fighter.

King salmon inhabit the waters of Southeast Alaska year-round. Large king salmon bound for spawning grounds and weighing up to 70 pounds are around from late April through June. Immature “feeder” kings ranging from 10 to 40 pounds come through the Sitka area and remain in the area to feed during August and September. Persistent anglers can find a few scattered fish throughout winter.

Anglers visiting the Sitka area most frequently ask, “When’s the best time to fish for king salmon?” Fishing improves greatly with spring weather in late April, but the prime time is from late May through the month of June. Anglers targeting king salmon may have catch rates of up to 5 hours per fish harvested (0.2 fish per hour) in June. Catch rates fall with the beginning of the commercial troll fishery in July, although good king salmon fishing continues throughout the summer.

The best way to locate king salmon is to locate bait fish—usually with a fathometer. Once herring or needlefish schools are found, you can be sure king salmon are not far away. Presence of sea birds also indicates presence of bait fish. Murres, murrelets, auklets, and other diving birds are notorious for swimming under herring schools and forcing bait fish to the surface. When this happens, flapping, anxious gulls can be spotted from miles away attacking the balled-up herring schools. If you don’t find baitfish schools on the fathometer or see bird activity, explore around points of land that project out into tidal currents, where schools of bait fish are likely to be found. The currents create eddies and rips that concentrate food for bait fish, and, in turn, attract king salmon.

Marine sport anglers use two techniques for ocean salmon fishing: trolling and mooching. The traditional method, “trolling,” uses flasher gear like commercial salmon trollers, but many trollers forego the use of flashers and fish a single herring behind the sinker, hooked to swim in a large oscillating circle. This method usually

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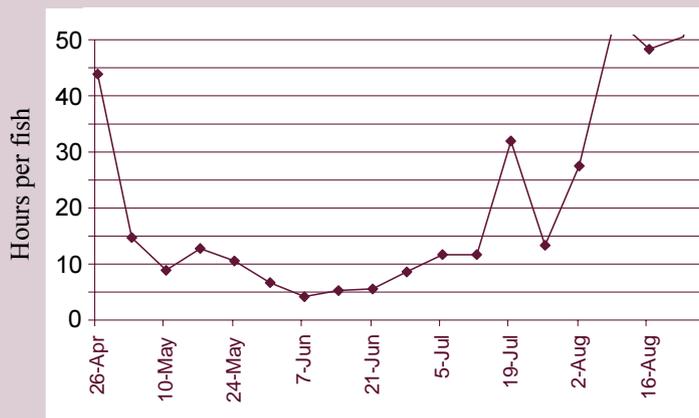
catches larger, although maybe not as many, fish and is often used near dropoffs and submerged kelp beds. Flashers or dodgers require relatively heavy line (30-pound test or greater) and heavy sinkers (12–32 oz). A downrigger with a quick disconnect snap lets an angler fish without heavy weights on his gear and makes fighting a hooked fish much easier.

Rotating flashers or side-wobbling dodgers attract salmon either by resembling a school of

bait avoiding a predator or by imitating the flash of a salmon attacking a school of bait.

A suitable flasher rod is long enough to cope with 5 or 6 feet of flasher leader, plus 2¹/₂ feet of terminal leader. Shorter rods can be used along with a downrigger, as no flasher leader is required. Rods should be sensitive enough to feel what is on the line. (Flasher gear may appear to be insensitive and unwieldy, but it is in fact so

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Average weekly king salmon catch rates in Sitka, 1994 to 1998.

in the tackle shop, because the very best bait day in and day out is herring. The three basic herring setups are a whole herring, a plug-cut herring (head severed), and a strip—a narrow triangle cut from the side of a frozen or salted herring. Most anglers use two hooks of size range 2/0 to 5/0, tied in tandem depending upon bait length; some prefer a single hook rig. All herring bait setups are designed to spin in the water. Any rate of rotation will work as long as there is rotation. Which of the three setups to use is purely a matter of personal preference, and the best way to learn to use them is to have someone who fishes them show you how.

sensitive that small pieces of grass fouled on the terminal gear are easily detected and corrected).

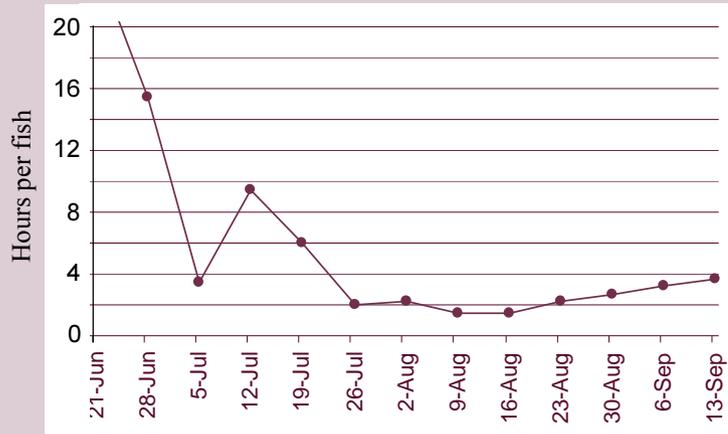
Terminal gear usually consists of a small herring, or a strip from a larger one, threaded onto a treble hook or affixed onto twin single hooks with a “bait biter” so that it is tossed back and forth by the rotating flasher. Single- or double-hook artificials (plastic hootchies or “skirts,” bucktail flies, and small spoons) can also be used behind a flasher. Most anglers trail the terminal gear 28 to 32 inches behind the flasher when fishing for king salmon. Flasher color and size are individual preferences, based on experience, reputation, or superstition.

The other saltwater salmon fishing technique, “mooching,” consists of fishing with lighter gear from an anchored, drifting, or slowly trolled boat. During the peak summer months, mooching probably is more effective for catching large king salmon because it can cover the widest range of depths. Mooching rods are 7½- to 10-foot fiberglass or graphite composite, rigged with a light saltwater revolving spool reel with line capacity of about 200 yd of 10- to 30-pound test monofilament.

The many kinds and colors of artificial lures, plugs, and spoons displayed on tackle shop walls may all be used effectively, although some colors work better than others during certain times of the year. Many king salmon anglers, though, leave the artificial lures hanging

➤ **COHO SALMON** To many anglers, these are second only to king salmon. With the exception of pink salmon in some years, more coho salmon are harvested by sport anglers than any other species in Southeast Alaska. They are easy to catch, and they often travel in large schools that provide intense action. Coho salmon fishing can be done with a variety of gear from any vessel. Large boats can work deeper waters, and open skiffs—even canoes—can cruise along the margins of kelp beds. Most anglers fish with fresh or frozen herring bait while trolling, drifting with the tide, or anchoring in areas of active tidal currents.

Coho salmon are usually no deeper than 30 feet and are frequently caught within a foot or two of the



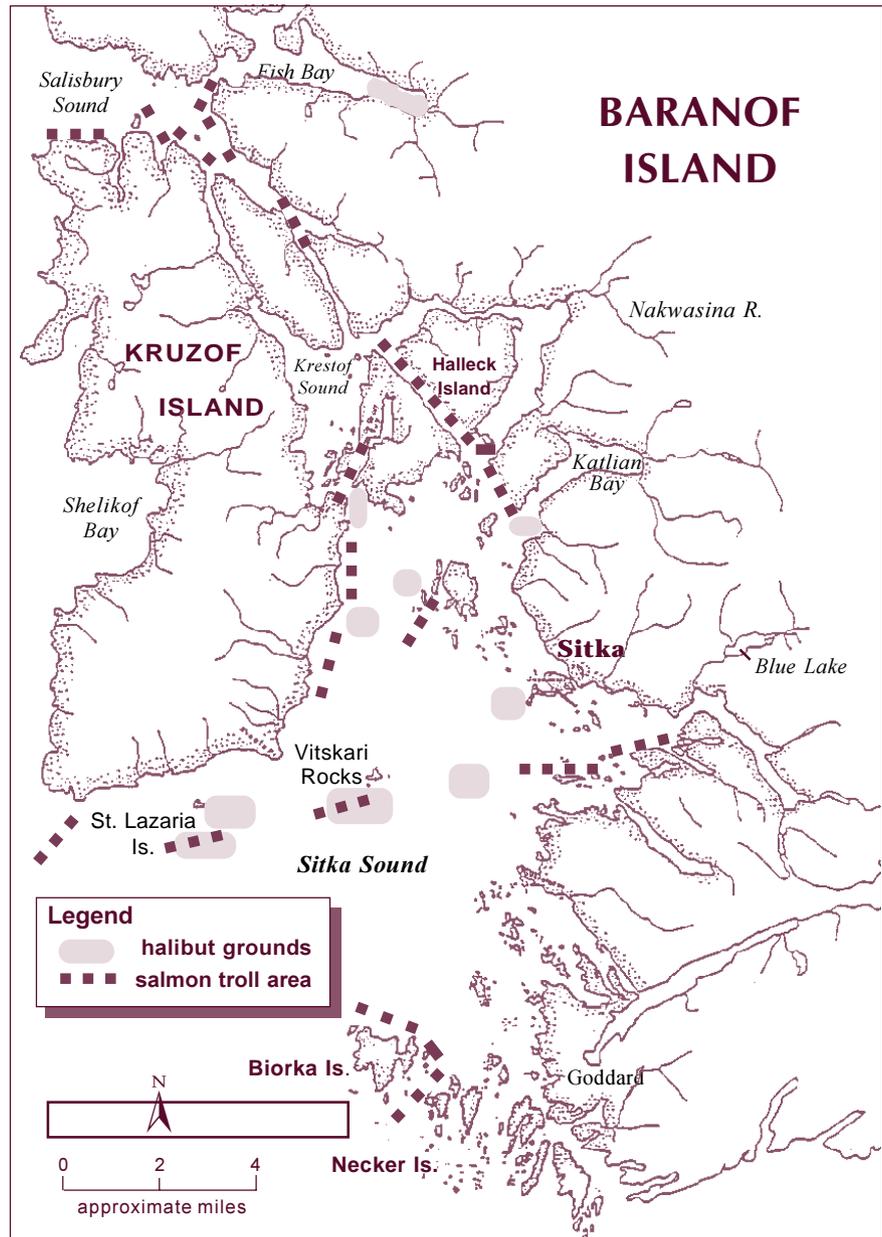
Average weekly coho salmon catch rates in Sitka, 1994 to 1998.

surface. Gear varies with the angler's style. Some use heavy line with leaders, flashers, or dodgers, and a whole herring for bait, but coho can be taken just as effectively on the simplest gear: 15- to 20-pound test line and 2- to 6-ounce trolling weights, followed by a 25-pound test double hook leader and a herring fished whole, as a strip, or plug. When they're biting, nearly anything works.

Spinning gear is equally effective, with fly rod and flies, or bait casting. Coho salmon are aggressive and strike readily; they usually do so "on the run" and set the hook themselves.

All anglers agree on one thing: successful coho salmon fishing is a matter of being in the right place at the right time. The right place is an area where ocean currents and coastal topography concentrate the fish or their food source. The right time is usually an hour or so before or after a change of tide. However, none of the above seems to matter when the run is at its peak, usually the third week in August.

Coho salmon begin appearing in the sport catch late in June, when anglers are fishing for king salmon. Their availability and catch rates rise through mid-August (see graph on page 13). In early to mid-September they head rapidly toward their home streams to congregate near the estuaries they left as smolt 17 months earlier. Saltwater fishing for coho salmon is essentially over by the end of September.



Map 4. Some of the more popular trolling drags and halibut holes around the Sitka area.

In the early 1990s, coho salmon populations in the Sitka area were depressed, and escapements to local rivers and streams were very low. This created poor fishing from shore in areas where spin-casting was once a very popular sport. But in 1994, record numbers of coho salmon returned to streams and, since then, returns to the Sitka area have remained moderately high.