

Idaho Fish & Game News

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Fishing in High Water: Salmon Fishing Outlook

The fish runs may be late, but the good news is they are likely to include more big ones.

The long cool spring has delayed the Chinook returns, and the lateness of the runs had some concerned that the returns would be less than preseason forecasts. But the counts at Bonneville and Lower Granite dams have picked up, and the return is about 35 percent greater than expected.

Especially exciting for anglers this year is the composition of the return – there's a higher proportion of the fish in this year's run that have spent three, rather than two years in the ocean. That extra year in the ocean can mean the fish are 10 pounds heavier than fish returning after only two years in the ocean.

The Chinook fishing season opened April 23 in the Clearwater, Snake, Little Salmon and part of the lower Salmon rivers. Usually by the end of June some spring salmon fisheries already have shut down – not this year.

At the end of June, the Clearwater River was still running about 50,000 cubic feet per second at Orofino. The Salmon River was running more than 80,000 at Whitebird.

High flows in the Salmon River have delayed the fishery, but when they drop below 55,000, fishing should pick up considerably. The flow was projected to drop below 50,000 by the Fourth of July weekend.

The good news is that anglers will likely be able to fish for salmon well into July.

Though anglers have harvested about 75 percent of the recreational harvest share of adult salmon in the Clearwater

River basin, they have caught only about 17 percent of the harvest share in the lower Salmon and Little Salmon rivers.

High water flows may be making fishing difficult at times, but there will be salmon to catch – and longer than usual.

This isn't the first time high spring flows have delayed salmon fishing. In the 1970s heavy snow pack and late spring run-off contributed to poor fishing on the Little Salmon River. Most salmon stayed in the main Salmon River until flows began to subside in the third to fourth week of June.



IDFG photo by N.S. Nokkentved

Anglers reel in some nice Chinook in fast water in the upper Salmon River.

Once the flows dropped to around 2,000 cubic feet per second and the river started to clear, the salmon started their final migration towards Rapid River Hatchery. Numbers of salmon at the Rapid River trap went from fewer than 20 per day to several hundred in just a few days. Suddenly salmon fishing was phenomenal at the mouth of the Little Salmon and the Rapid River hole with anglers

reporting double-digit catch rates for a day.

Today anglers are again waiting for the right conditions that will encourage the salmon still in the main river to move upstream and into the Little Salmon River. Though nearly all of the 18,000 adult Chinook destined for the Rapid River Hatchery this year have crossed the Lower Granite Dam, as of June 28 just over 900 had been trapped at the hatchery weir.

Bottom line, there are lots of hatchery salmon in the rivers still to be caught. Anglers who can be flexible and who can fish falling water levels can expect to have an outstanding fishing experience.

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Wet Spring Brings High Water, Benefits Idaho Native Fish

For fishing in Idaho in future years, the high water this year may be good news.

High flows rejuvenate gravels and create habitat complexity by flushing fine sediments out of spawning and rearing areas. Healthy stream beds, free of excess fine material, provide well-oxygenated water incubating eggs and larval fish.

High flows also move woody material into the river system. Wood is the basic building block to a healthy stream environment. Organic material, released into the stream as wood breaks down, influences habitat availability for fish. Organic matter also provides food for insects and other invertebrates that in turn are food for fish.

High flows create more undercut banks for cover, more deep holes to provide summer and winter habitat, new side channels and more willow and cottonwood suckering for stream shading.

Improved habitat may lead to improved reproduction and survival for most native fish species.

Later run-off and high flows this year may also reduce stress that fish will experience from high water temperatures and low dissolved oxygen that are more likely in low water years.

Spring and early summer fishing conditions are going to be difficult because of the high flows and cool water.

That's the bad news.

The good news is, that late summer and fall fishing for native trout species in local streams could be very good.

Projections of adult Chinook salmon returns over Lower Granite Dam by hatchery and the estimated harvest share of adult Chinook salmon available for harvest by sport fisheries upstream of the Lower Granite damsite based on PIT tag detection and numbers of adult Chinook salmon needed to fill hatchery broodstock requirements.

Hatchery Release Groups	Projected Number Over Lower Granite Dam	Number Needed For Hatchery Broodstock	Projected Sport Fishery Harvest Share
Dworshak	2,513	1,000	757
Kooskia	2,565	800	883
Selway	2,236	-	1,118
Powell	1,426	700	363
SF Clearwater	3,020	1,000	1,010
Clearwater River Total	11,761	3,500	4,130
Snake River (Hells Canyon) Total	3,596	400	1,598
Rapid River	17,978	2,000	7,989
Little Salmon	1,439	-	720
Lower Salmon / Little Salmon Total	19,417	2,000	8,709
South Fork Salmon River	5,000	1,300	1,850
Pahsimeroi Hatchery	4,100	600	1,750
Sawtooth Hatchery	280	700	-
Upper Salmon River Total	4,380	1,300	1,750
Clearwater, Snake and Salmon River Total	44,154	8,500	18,037

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Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.



Anglers Urged to be Cautious Near Fast Moving Water

Anglers must practice caution when fishing or wading in high flowing waters.

One slip on the riverbank can send an incautious angler into the river and into a current strong enough to move rocks larger than a basketball. Things happen fast under these conditions so it's important to plan ahead.

When fishing on the bank of any stream, and especially during high flows, anglers should make sure of their footing. Avoid loose material and steep banks. When finding a place to fish, look for a flat, stable area as a "fishing base." Decide how far it is safe to go upstream or downstream.

Anglers should identify their safety limits before they begin fishing. They should have a dip net for landing fish. Many anglers have been lost when they lose their balance while trying to recover a fish by hand. Large landing nets also make a handy "grab pole" for reaching out to someone who has fallen into the river.

Dangers associated with strong current increase as flows increase.

Flows of 2,000 cubic feet per second or more are dangerous on the Little Salmon River. The main Salmon River, when flowing in excess of 20,000 is also dangerous. Large debris and swift currents that come with high flows are a recipe for unexpected situations that can turn deadly.

Anglers fishing from a boat, especially a smaller boat, should not try anchoring in fast moving river sections. A strong current can pull the bow under water.

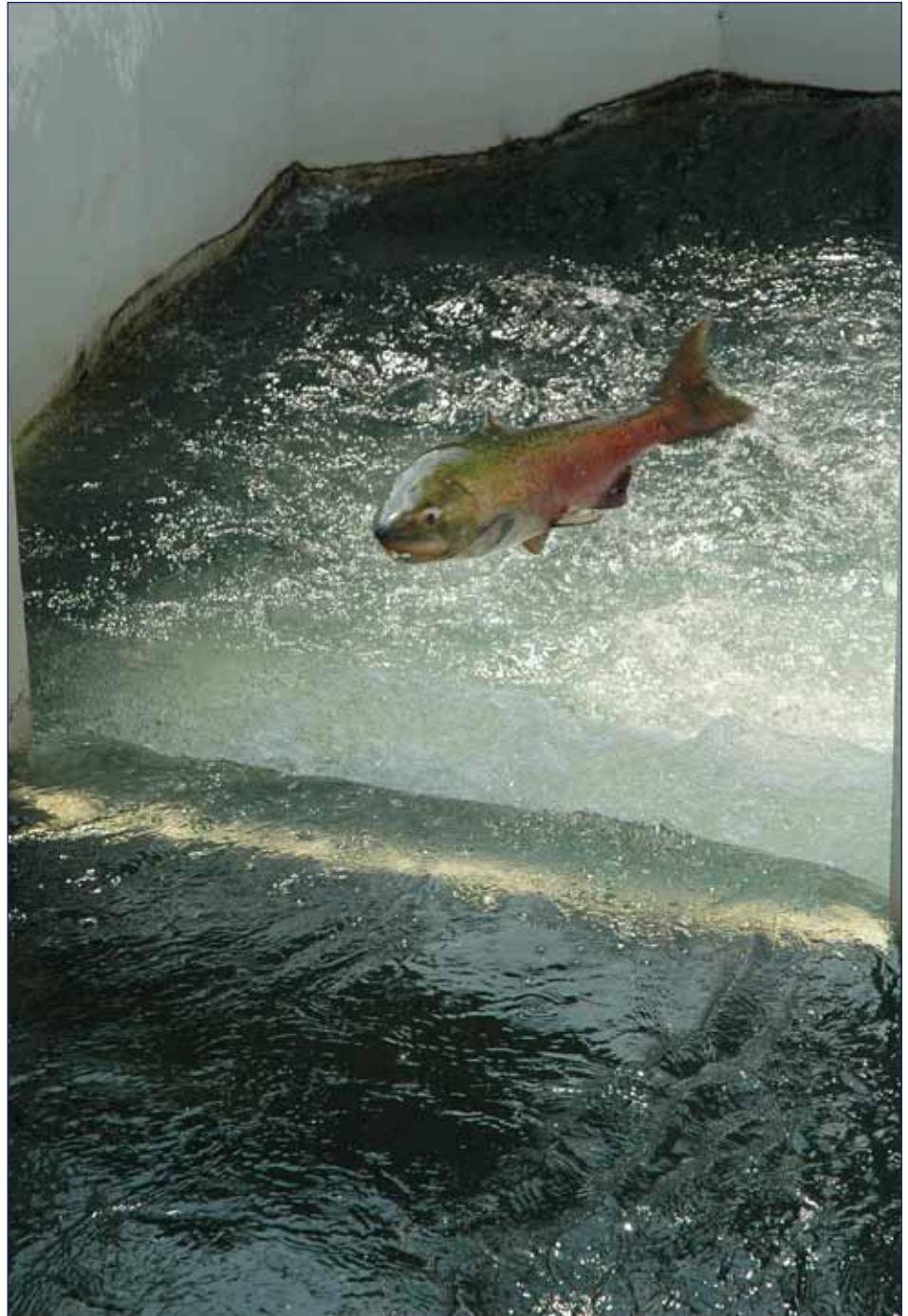
When fishing along the bank, be careful of footing. Even along the bank, the current can be swift. In cold water, it doesn't take long before the power of the river overcomes even the strongest swimmer.

Keep an eye on the water level. Many an angler has ventured onto a gravel bar only to have the water rise and make for a difficult return to the bank. Each river has a different peak time for flows based

on elevation of the snow melt. Check a local U.S. Geological Survey streamflow web page for daily river fluctuations and timing.

Information for Idaho can be found at: <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/id/nwis/rt>.

One of the most important tips for safety is fish with a buddy. Chances of surviving a mishap are greater when someone else can report an accident to trained responders and help with the rescue.



A Chinook leaps into the Sawtooth hatchery trap on the upper Salmon River.

IDFG photo

Summertime Fishing



Summer, salmon and fishable conditions eventually arrive on the upper Salmon River.

IDFG photo by Pete Hassemer

Some Tips for Fishing When Conditions are Less Than Ideal

The salmon still in the river are waiting for the right conditions to move upriver.

When anglers see the water dropping they should be prepared to go fishing, because the fish will be eager to run and will be actively striking at lures and baits.

The key word here is “striking” at lures and bait. Though salmon don’t eat once they leave the ocean, they will instinctively “strike” at lures and baits. Often they take an object in their mouth and spit it back out, and they typically don’t strike hard at a lure or bait.

Here are some tips for fishing when the water is fast and high:

Ask at the local bait shop or café to see what gear is the most effective – given the fishing conditions. These are also the places expert anglers congregate and share stories.

Don’t be afraid to ask.

When fishing during high flows, keep in mind that the fish don’t want to expend any more energy than is necessary. Fish back water areas and eddy lines. These are the lower velocity areas salmon will use to travel or hold in until conditions improve.

“A bad day fishing is still better than a good day in the office.”

At the confluence of two streams or a stream and the main river, salmon will move in the cleaner water. If you fish a confluence, favor the clean water side of the mixing zone.

Bobbers and bait can be an effective combination in backwater areas. Make sure your bait is on or near the bottom. If you fish an eddy line, a side planer will

effectively keep your lure working and can be cast from a bank or fished from a boat.

Fish and Game suggests anglers use heavier line than normal, because it will give them a better chance of keeping pressure on the fish if they hook one, and it will help prevent the fish from making a run into strong current.

One of the advantages of fishing from a boat is that anglers can follow a salmon when it makes a run. But whether in a boat or on the bank, anglers should decide on their safety limits of travel before they hook a salmon.

And – for the anglers who hook one to take home: Fresh caught salmon filleted and cooked over a charcoal fire, with a few chunks of wet alder or cherry wood for smoke, makes a fine summertime treat.