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Columbia River Summer Chinook

By Buzz Ramsey

The rod tip dove as the salmon spun in the current and headed westward from our anchored position. The fish was pulling so hard, in fact, that our son Wade had a difficult time removing his rod from its holder. Meanwhile, wife Maggie and son Blake cleared our outfits from the water while I cast off the anchor line.

The big-shouldered chinook streaked toward the center of the river, us following along with me steering the kicker motor. Refusing to give up, the fish stayed deep, as Wade tried to pry the bottom-hugging chinook toward the surface. The fish seemed tireless, each time Wade gained a few feet of line the fish would respond by peeling yards from his reel.

According to retired ODFW fish biologist Don Swartz, historically speaking, the Columbia's run of Summer Chinook was its most numerous. For example, during the 1880's (for a 10-year period) the average annual run of Summer Chinook swimming back to the Columbia was 4 to 5 million fish. During this same time period, the annual commercial harvest averaged 1 to 2 million fat salmon and, of course, they were then all wild fish produced by habitats since blocked or ruined.

Things are much different now, with this year's run projected to be 70,700 Summer Chinook, which is decent by recent standards. As of this writing, the state has proposed 2-week sport season west of Bonneville Dam scheduled to run from June 22 through July 5 with a 2 adult, plus jack salmon, limit – fin clipped or not.

If you frequent the Columbia River upstream of Bonneville Dam, the proposed season is thought to run the full month of July with daily

limits the same as that west of Bonneville Dam. Like the lower river, up to five in Oregon (four in Washington) adipose fin-clipped Jack Salmon, fish less than 24-inches in length, may be retained in addition to your adult salmon limit.

Keep in mind that the Columbia's summer season could change from the current proposal listed above. You can quickly confirm the season dates by visiting the News Release sections of the Oregon or Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife web site or by calling their offices. For Oregon dial: 503-947-6001; for Washington dial: 360-902-2500.

The good news for anglers wanting to participate in this close-to-home fishery is that Summer Chinook are much larger than spring run salmon. Although these salmon come in all sizes, many average 20 to 35 pounds with more than a few 40-plus pound chinook harvested by lucky sport anglers each year.

At least on the lower river, it has been my experience that Summer Chinooks respond best to lures fished in a stationary fashion, which means that plunking rather than trolling or back-trolling techniques often produce best. In addition, with surface water temperatures ranging in the mid 60's during late June, the salmon are often found migrating near bottom at river depths of 15 feet or more.

Near Bonneville Dam, fishing deep water often means anchoring in fast water where spinners produce best. For example, on most years we've caught the bulk of our salmon on spinners in water so fast it required the use of up to 16 ounces of weight to hold our lures stationary in the current.

While a wide blade shapes, like Bear Valley or Colorado, might perform best in the medium currents of the lower Columbia, we've had the best success in the fast currents near Bonneville employing a size 7 CV blade. Favorite spinner colors include metal finishes like copper, gold and 50/50; and painted finishes like green, chartreuse, red, and rainbow - there are many combinations. The rule here, like most fishing, is to try different colors and let the fish tell you what they like.

Typical rigging for employing spinners in the fast water sections near Bonneville are a 50-inch leader combined with a 16 to 24 inch weight-dropper line. Paramount to avoiding what can quickly become a twisted mess is to rig a swivel half way down your leader.

Given the fast currents near Bonneville, the length of your weight dropper line might vary depending on current speed and/or the contour of the bottom. For example, if you're anchored where the bottom gets progressively deeper downstream of your boat or the current seems to be less near bottom than the surface, consider using a full 24-inch weight dropper line. In areas where the bottom is flat and current strong near bottom, a short dropper line might produce better than a longer one.

The standard rig for anglers fishing spinners farther downstream on the Columbia, near Portland or Longview, where the river current is often slower, are different. Weight dropper lines for these areas are sometimes longer and leaders shorter. For example, a popular spinner setup for many areas of the lower Columbia might include a 30 to 36 inch weight dropper line combined with a 24-inch leader.

Plugs, like a medium size Flatfish or Kwikfish, work where currents are slower and are often rigged behind a 60-inch leader and held near bottom with a 24 to 30 inch dropper line connected to a weight.

Of course none of this was on Wade's mind as he wrestled the Summer Chinook through the strong, sometimes swirling, currents of the Columbia River. The fish did finally tire, but not before convincing us he was much larger than his final 20-pound heft.