

YAKIMA BAIT. KNOW-HOW REPORT



FREE TAKE ONE!

CATCHING SACRAMENTO KING SALMON

The Sacramento River (and tributaries like the Feather, American and Mokelumne rivers) serves up some of the best Chinook salmon fishing on the entire West Coast. Some seasons, over three quarters of a million kings make their way up California's Central Valley en route to their spawning grounds -- and fishing can be spectacular from mid July through December.

Sacramento's kings aren't slouches when it comes to size, either. Every season, there are countless fish landed by anglers over 30 pounds, a fair number of 40 plus pounders and a handful of salmon over 50 pounds. And they can get even larger than that – the state record for the species, an 88 pounder taken in 1979, came from the Sac.

From it's mouth at Rio Vista to the upper limits of legal angling near Red Bluff (a distance of roughly 200 miles), the Sacramento's demeanor varies greatly – shifting from a wide, murky channel down low to a clear and fast flowing stream with rapids, riffles and holes in the upper reaches. With this wide variety of water styles, there are many ways to catch kings here. How you go about it depends on where you're fishing...



The Sacramento River is one of the nation's top salmon fisheries with fish in the river from mid-July through December

DOWNSTREAM TROLLING

In the sluggish, warm tidal sections of the river from Verona down to Rio Vista, one of the best ways to target Chinook is to troll downstream. In that stretch, the fish don't usually linger for long. They're already above the salt-to-fresh acclimation zone and well below the spawning areas, so they're typically blasting through. The kings there are moving quickly and they're also fresh from the salt and aggressive biters. For all those reasons, trolling downstream is the best way to get at them.

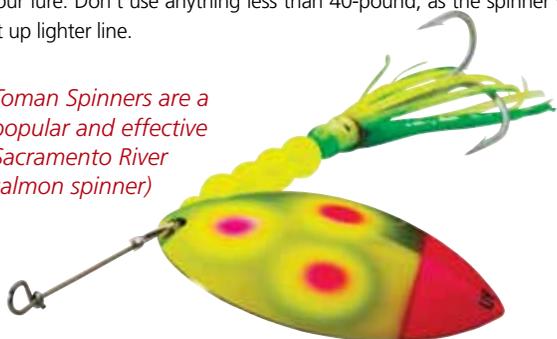
By going downhill, you can crank up the trolling speed -- which allows you to cover more water and, thus, find the fish more quickly. This technique also works because the kings in that area are still very much dialed into their ocean feeding habits. When a plug or spinner goes whizzing downstream past them, it triggers the "eat me" response.

SPINNERS

Where there's a bit more current – from Verona to Sacramento – I like to fish Bob Toman Thumper Spinners in chartreuse and green. I like to get them down to the bottom and then bring them a crank or two. That puts the lure right where the fish can see them. Just be sure to periodically check that your spinner is near the bottom.

To rig up, slip your main line through a quality barrel swivel and then add 2-4 plastic beads and then tie another swivel to the end of your line. To the sliding swivel, run 12 to 18 inches of line and to the end, attach a snap. This is where you'll clip your sinker (1-4 ounce cannon ball style). To the open eye of the swivel on the main line, run a two-foot section of 60-pound mono and then tie in a bead chain swivel. From there, another two feet of 40-pound mono goes down to your lure. Don't use anything less than 40-pound, as the spinner will quickly twist up lighter line.

Toman Spinners are a popular and effective Sacramento River salmon spinner)



RIGGING TIP: When downstream trolling, use a rod with a slightly faster action than you'd normally use when fishing plugs – the fish often pick up the lure and swim towards the boat and you'll miss these "slack line" bites with a soft rod.

FISHING TIP: While you can't add a sardine wrap to a spinner, you can add extra "meal appeal" by lathering it up with scent. Try sardine, herring and garlic.

PLUGS

From Sacramento down to Rio Vista, I'll mainly troll plugs like T-50 and M2 Flatfish in silver/chartreuse. Rigging is similar to the spinners above though you can bump up both the leader and dropper lengths a bit and get rid of the bead chain swivel.

The technique is not unlike downstream trolling – get your gear down to the bottom and crank it just off the sand. As a basic rule of thumb, your lure should be running 1 to 3 feet up off the bottom and have only intermittent contact with the riverbed.



Wrapped plugs like this Mag Lip 4.5 deliver salmon-sized results on the Sacramento

While you can catch fish with a "naked" lure, a fresh sardine wrap added to the underside of the plug greatly enhances your chances of getting bit. You can also add crawdad tail to your wrap or soak it in a wide array of scents – stuff like anise, shrimp, crawfish and sardine all work well.

It's best to troll plugs with the rods in the holders. You want the salmon to grab the lure and turn with it before you provide any resistance – not easy to do when you've got the rod in your hand!

RIGGING TIP: Change your sardine wraps ever 15 minutes!

FISHING TIP: Kings in the lower river seem to bite best around the tide changes.

ANCHOR FISHING

While boats catch Sacramento kings on the anchor all up and down the river, the real hotbeds for this technique include the mouths of the American and Feather rivers as well as the section of the main Sac between Knights Landing and Colusa.

The trick to fishing on the pick is to locate a travel lane, camp out on it and wait for the fish to come to you. It works best in the narrower sections of the river, where the kings have to swim up obvious lines.

When fishing on anchor, try sardine-wrapped HawgNose, M2, T-50 and T-55 Flatfish in silver/chartreuse, silver/red or pink/white. To your main line, attach a wire spreader and then run a 5-to 6-foot leader back to the lure and a 2- to 4-foot weight dropper. If the current's really ripping, increase the length of the dropper so your lure doesn't dig into the sand.

Drop the rig down to the bottom and then reel it up just enough that the lure is above the slack section of current right along the riverbed.

In areas of faster current, you can also fish Toman Thumper spinners in the same fashion.

FISHING TIP: Gold plugs work well on the Sacramento System on cloudy days.

RIGGING TIP: Palomar Knots are easy to tie and super strong.

BACKROLLING

As you move up the river above Colusa, the Sacramento changes dramatically. The levees are set further back away from the water and the river transforms from a relatively straight channel to a clear flowing, cobble-bottomed river. All the way up to Red Bluff, you'll find lots of holes and runs that are perfect for backrolling plugs.

The two main ways to present a plug to river salmon are Flatlining and Back-Bouncing.

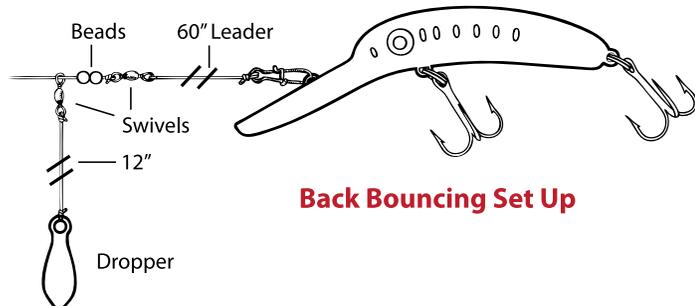
FLATLINING

This technique refers to fishing plugs without any weight. With plugs like the MagLip 4.5 and HawgNose FlatFish, you can reach bottom in water as deep as 20 feet in some spots – and I've used MagLips with success in 24 feet of water!

Start by positioning the boat slightly upstream of a good-looking spot and let the lines out 40 to 60 feet. Without weight, the plugs will simply float on the surface until you engage the reels – at which point the water tension on them will force them to dive and start wobbling. Try to keep all the plugs at the same distance behind the boat – salmon are more likely to strike when confronted with a "wall" of plugs bearing down on them.

Use a kicker motor or the oars to slip downriver at a rate that's approximately one-quarter to one-half of the current's speed. Salmon typically face upstream, and the objective here is to put the wiggling, throbbing lures right in their faces. Flatlining works best when you have at least a moderate current.

In sections of the Sac that feature deep holes, back bouncing is the ticket. For this style of plug pulling, you'll need to run a three-way swivel to the end of your mainline and then attach a 12- to 30-inch dropper line to the second eye and a 4- to 6-foot leader to the last eye. The plug goes on the other end of the leader and a cannon ball sinker is fastened to the drop line.



The idea here is to use just enough lead to get your lure down near – but not anchored to – the bottom. Once you're set up in a good spot, drop the sinkers down to the bottom and then reel up a couple cranks so that the plug starts throbbing. As the boat drops slowly downstream, keep checking for the bottom. Reel up or free spool more line as necessary to keep the lure following the contours of the bottom...so it stays "in the zone."

T-55 Flatfish in chrome/chartreuse and pink/white have long been favorites on the Sac, especially in famous spots like the Old Mouth and the Barge Hole. T-50's and HawgNoses also fish well with this method – just be sure to keep a fresh sardine wrap on at all times!

THE TAKEDOWN!

Of course, the takedown is where the fun really begins. Unfortunately, it's often the point at which the fun prematurely ends for many beginners as well. Knowing how to handle the bite is critical to success.

The classic plug takedown is a slow, methodical affair. It starts with a solid bump as the fish either nudges the lure -- or takes his initial bite. Then, if you can handle the pressure, the rod tip will pump several times as the salmon starts violently shaking its head. If all goes well, the rod tip will bury sometime soon thereafter and line will fly off the reel.

I'm sure you noticed the "if all goes well" part of the scenario. You have to have nerves of steel to get to that point as hasty hook sets are the biggest problem rookie pluggers have with this technique. When a huge salmon is wallowing on your plug and your rod tip is in the water, it's ridiculously hard to be patient. But you've got to keep your composure. It seems odd, but you'll miss 90 percent of the bites you get unless you allow the fish to completely mouth the plug (seems like an eternity) and then start swimming off with it. Wait until it really loads up before doing anything.

When flatling, the best bet is to simply put the rods in the holders -- that way, you've got a built-in delayed response time to help you from pulling the trigger too soon.

RIGGING TIP: Add an extra split ring between your hooks and the hook attachment eyes on your plugs – this allows your trebles to rotate nearly 360 degrees, which will help keep kings from pulling off during the fight.

FISHING TIP: Sometimes kings will suspend well off the bottom in deep holes, so pay attention to your graph and adjust the depth of your lures accordingly.

CLEANING YOUR LURES

At the end of each fishing day it's important to scrub down all your lures with clean water and a plastic scrub brush. Remove all sardine and commercial scent residue and then dry and store them for the next trip.



Since 1998, full time fishing junkie and professional guide, JD Richey, has been leading fishing adventures in Northern California and Alaska since 1998. As a staff writer for several national magazines and regional newspapers, he has penned thousands of articles on fishing and outdoor sports and has written books on the subject as well.

In his "spare time," Richey writes and maintains the popular online fishing magazine, www.fishwithjd.com.

On the conservation end, Richey has served as a consultant on several river restoration projects that have helped boost native fish populations.

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