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# The Kenai is King

## ...and for more than Chinooks.

by Keith Jackson

**T**hink Alaska and the Kenai River, and it's likely you'd find yourself imagining the really big fish: 50-, 60- and 70-pound king salmon. That's a natural thought since the famous Kenai River is home to a race of giant Chinooks.

However, as good as the Kenai is for big salmon, there is so much more fishing opportunity in the Kenai Peninsula area that it gives a person pause.

"So what?" you ask. "This is Alaska. It's all good fishing, right?" Well, yes and no. So much of the Alaskan fishing experience is built around runs of salmon that may not be there when you're fishing that taking a trip without extensive planning and a dash of good luck is often a crapshoot. Pick the wrong time in the right area, and you could find yourself fishing an empty river.

But the Kenai Peninsula is not that way. From late spring through early fall, you'll find some kind of Alaskan-style excellent fishing taking place somewhere in the area.

A prime example of that was a trip a bunch of writers and tackle-business folks took last June. We didn't fish the Kenai for kings, but we did find ourselves on a long-range overnight trip fishing for Chinook, coho, sea bass and halibut in the ocean; Chinook in the Kaslof River and rainbow trout and Dolly Varden char in the Middle Kenai. If we'd hung around a bit, we'd have hit the run of sockeye, or red salmon, near its peak. But because this was an odd-numbered year, the pink salmon weren't running—they run only on even-numbered years way up north.

We had other options available as well: we could fish for pike on nearby sloughs and lakes. We could fly to a nearby river where some giant Chinook were in, or we could have fished in some of the lakes and streams for trout and char between Seward and Soldotna.

The problem with that smorgasbord of opportunity is the same as choosing dessert at a church social: They're all so good you have to decide what you have room for.

### The Ocean Adventure

We drove from the Kenai over the pass to Seward where we boarded Crackerjack Charters' newest boat for an overnighter. Our destination was a three-hour run away, and while other boats out of Seward fish the area in day trips, the travel makes for a short fishing day. The overnight trip would afford us lots more time with lines in the water.



Capt. Andy Mesirow, First Mate Jason Bechtel and Mustad's Bob Funk get giddy over a nice halibut that ate a twister tail made more tempting with Mustad Ultra Bite, a pheromone scent.

In the Alaskan saltwater, people fish for salmon in three basic ways: anchoring with bait, trolling or jigging, which is a fairly new method.

We trolled, using downriggers and plug-cut herring. And we caught fish; some were kings and some were coho. Because we were off peak for the king run we landed no really big fish, although we did hook (but subsequently lost) a couple of kings that were in the 30-pound-plus category.

While the salmon fishing was fun, it's a junior varsity game.



The varsity fishing in Alaska is for halibut.

Halibut are big flat fish that often weigh several hundred pounds and taste like a saltwater version of walleyes.

Andy Mezirow, our captain, has extensive knowledge of the waters around Montague Island, so it was no surprise when he fine-tuned our location before we dropped anchor on the edge of an expansive, shallow flat. It didn't take long to hook into some big fish.

Fortunately, the water we were fishing was less than 200 feet deep as pulling up 'buts from deeper water can turn into a real chore—especially with fish pushing past a couple of hundred pounds. Halibut are strong fighters, but it's mostly an up-and-down battle that employs brute strength—and makes you wish you were in better shape.

We also tagged lingcod, yelloweye rockfish and had a go at salmon sharks.

When we tied up to a resort dock in Prince William Sound that night, stretching our legs as we walked around the island was great, but it was no match for the fresh barbecued salmon, halibut and steaks we had for dinner.

I've also made single day trips out of Seward with Ninilchik Charters and skipper Mike Flores, in whose cabins we stayed after the overnigher. Flores does an excellent job of being both a skipper and host, but a word of warning: if you're fishing off his boat in the height of coho season, don't take the first two fish you catch. If you want to fish with a fly rod or light gear, take your time as you'll likely have silvers around the boat

all day long in perfect range for a fly rod or light spinning outfit.

## The Drift

Fishing the Kasilof River is a blend of real Alaska and reality: It's wild, but packed with other drift boats. The Kasilof is a half-hour drive from the Kenai, and when the big river is closed or has conservation restrictions, the Kasilof gets pressure. But unlike the Kenai, there are no

Guide Chuck Peck of Ninilchik Charters, originally from Manistee, Michigan, prepares to turn back a wild king salmon that David Draper of Cabela's caught on the Kasilof River.

motors on this river as it's fairly small.

However, it does boast a pretty good run of both wild and hatchery Chinook, which can be differentiated by the missing adipose fin—a necessary distinction since only one hatchery Chinook may be kept per day. All wild fish must be released promptly.


I fished on the Kasilof for two days. The first day, our boat blanked although GLA editor Dave Mull and David Draper, from Cabela's, caught two fish apiece. We took solace in the fact that few other boats caught fish. The second day we caught salmon and hooked and lost several more, pointing out the importance of run timing.

This is a good place to learn how West Coast salmon fishermen chase fish. We used Kwikfish with sardine wraps, back-bounced eggs with Spin-N-Glos and fished divers and bait—all popular Northwest techniques for salmon.


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## Kenai's Big Rainbows

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Instead of fishing the Kasilof the second day, some of our group opted to run with guide Mark Glassmaker on a trip for the outsized rainbows on the Kenai.

In the lower river, this means that the guide will be using an outboard-powered skiff.

For those who like trout fishing, this is a phenomenal fishery with double and triple-digit numbers of trout coming to hand in the course of a full day. What makes totals like these really impressive is the fact several of the trout will weigh more than five pounds with 10- and 12-pound trout fairly common.

When you're fishing beads below spawning salmon, you can expect to catch Dolly Varden char as well as the occasional salmon. On light gear in fast water, this is a hoot.

Bead fishing, for those unfamiliar with it, is using a plastic bead, colored like a salmon egg, as a lure. As practiced on the Kenai River, you thread the bead on a leader and peg it no more than 2 inches above the hook (by regulation). When you set the hook, the leader slides, and the hook hits the fish out the outside of the mouth or just inside the jaw. By pegging a bead this way, you don't hook many fish in the gills or gullet.

## Last Call

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The end of the trip was anti-climactic. We picked up fish we had vacuum-packed and frozen for the return trip, boarded the

flight to Anchorage with connections home to New York, Chicago, Denver and Seattle.

We'd seen moose, bear, eagles, orcas, and a lot of country that bore no resemblance to our home states. We'd eaten well, caught lots of fish and had great times with good friends. We couldn't ask more from any trip. GLA

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## Contacts

Crackerjack Charters: 907-224-2606 or 877-224-2606;  
[www.crackerjackcharters.com](http://www.crackerjackcharters.com) for charters.

Ninilchik Charters: 888-290-3507;  
[www.ninilchikcharters.com](http://www.ninilchikcharters.com) for charters and lodging.

Mark Glassmaker: 800-622-1177; [www.mgfalaska.com](http://www.mgfalaska.com) for guide service and lodging on the banks of the Kenai River.

Fenton Brothers: 907-262-2502 for guide service.

TroutBeads.com: 888-665-2236 or [www.troutbeads.com](http://www.troutbeads.com) for beads.

Soldotna Trustworthy: 907-262-4655; [www.soldotnahardware.com](http://www.soldotnahardware.com) for good local information as well as good prices on Alaskan gear.

Alaska Seafoods Direct: 800-656-6070; [www.seafoods-direct.com](http://www.seafoods-direct.com) for processing, blast freezing, vacuum-packing and shipping your catch.