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Sacramento Area Salmon: Are You Trolling Fast Enough? ⁸

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by Fish Sniffer Staff | posted in: How-Tos | 0

A lazy crowd of people were sauntering down Main Street in Rio Vista on a balmy October afternoon. I emerged from the waterfront holding a large fish. The crowd started to stir as I walked up to the Rio Vista Bass Derby weigh-in table.



A woman quizzically asked, "What kind of fish is that?" It's a salmon", I replied. It struck me as kind of funny that somebody wouldn't know the difference between a striped bass and a salmon.

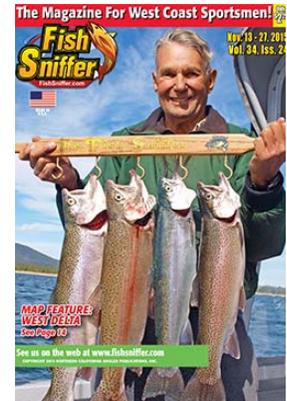
Then again, not everybody has been trying to figure out how to catch them for as long as I have. And why in the heck was I bringing a salmon to a striper derby anyway?

I've been on a quest to catch river salmon for as long as I can remember. I'm not the only one who becomes salmon-obsessed during the fall months. Have you ever taken an October drive down Highway 160 between Sacramento and Rio Vista? If so, you know that hordes of salmon seekers line the shores and choke the waterways to no end.

It doesn't really make a lot of sense. Aside from producing great smoked salmon, the table quality of river salmon is fair at best. The musty flavor is hard to mask, and doesn't compare to the meat of a freshly caught ocean salmon. Although they get big and put up a decent fight, river salmon don't pack the same punch as equally sized striped bass.

So why do we chase them? For me, it's the lure of mystery. There is nothing more exciting than trolling for several hours only to hear the staccato 'zzz-zzz-zzz' of your clicker going off. Is it another ten pounder? Or maybe it's the next state record, eclipsing the 88 pound king caught in 1979.

When reports mention 'Sacramento Salmon,' they are often referring to the Sacramento River way up by Red Bluff or Woodson Bridge. What I'd like to focus on here is trolling for salmon in the vicinity of the City of Sacramento itself.



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As the river carves through the Sacramento Region, it flows at a moderately slow pace. The levees are high, and the river is deep and calm. Great fishing can be found all the way from the mouth of the Feather River down to below Isleton.

Up in the Sacramento area, the tide changes don't reverse the river's flow like they do down in the Delta. Tides will, however, slow the current and cause a slight rise and fall of the water level. It seems like the salmon tend to bite around the time of the tide changes, with the outgoing tide being the better time to fish. However, river salmon have a knack for going on the bite at unexpected times, so it pays to fish when you can.

If you are new to trolling in Sacramento, spinners are a great choice. They run true at high speeds, and you don't have to worry about 'sardine wraps' and all of that mess.

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Start with a medium to medium heavy salmon or steelhead rod in the eight to nine foot range. A medium sized bait casting reel with a clicker is ideal, but a spinning reel will do. I like to run 25 pound test mono because of its stretchiness, but braid works as well.

For rigging, attach your mainline to the center of a V-shaped wire spreader. On one end of the spreader, you will attach your main leader. On the other end, attach a dropper leader to a four ounce trolling sinker.

For the main leader connection, I like to replace the stock swivel with a P-Line High Speed Rolling Barrel Swivel. This prevents line twist caused by the spinner. From this swivel, run a 48 inch long 25 pound test mono leader with a duo-lock snap at the terminal end. On the bottom side of the spreader, attach a 10 lb test 36 inch long dropper leader to the sinker.

The snap on the main leader allows you to swap out spinners to your heart's desire. I lean towards Silvertron double-bladed spinners because I've had great success with them. There are lots of other good spinners out there, so stick with whatever works for you.

For colors, I've had the best success with chartreuse (aka: fluorescent yellow). I've also had great luck using silver blades with purple beads once the sun is out. The glow-in-the-dark models also produce fish before the sun comes up. Oh, and don't forget to rub the insides of the blades with your favorite scented gel.

The great thing about spinners is that you can cover a lot of water trolling fast. Do you want to present your lure to 20 salmon, or 40 salmon? Start trolling at about 3.5 miles-per-hour GPS speed moving downstream.

On a slow incoming tide, I may drop the speed down to 3.2 mph. On a swift outgoing tide, I will bump the speed up as fast as 3.7 mph. They key is to only troll downstream – you will cover more fish that way.

Let out about 40 to 120 feet of line. I like to stagger my rods at different distances to prevent tangles. When letting line out, pause about every ten feet so the lure stays in motion. Let it out too fast, and your spinner will sink and get clams on the hooks.

You want your sinker ticking or bouncing the bottom at all times. I like to focus on water that's between 16 and 19 feet deep. That's the depth range where I've caught the majority of my fish. I tend to avoid the deeper holes, but will go shallower at times. I zigzag my way downstream looking for paths of travel which salmon navigate. When I hear the clicker screaming, I know my plan has paid off.



So why was I weighing in at the Rio Vista Bass Derby with a salmon? Well, for several years now they have been holding divisions for both sturgeon and salmon, in addition to striped bass. During this year's derby, I wasn't having much luck finding striper in large numbers.

I figured why not try for a salmon? When that nineteen pounder slammed my Silvertron, I thought for a second that I might have a chance to win the derby after all of these years. While I came up a few pounds short of victory, I did take third place, which certainly beats the old skunkeroo. And now, I have enough pocket change to invest in...well...more spinners.

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