

Night Fishing for Salmon on the American River

As of 2015, night fishing for salmon is legal downstream of the Capital City Freeway (a.k.a. Business 80) on the American River. **Before fishing, be sure to check the current regulations for legal areas to fish for salmon at night.**

As salmon make their way up the American River, they hold in cool deep holes in the lower end of the river. Deep holes known locally as 'the dredger holes' are located near the Highway 160 and railroad bridges below the Capital City Freeway. Good fishing in this area usually lasts from late September through mid-November.

I have a lot of experience fishing this area during the fall and I'm going to share some of my own personal methods here. This isn't the only way to fish, so keep in mind that using other methods will also catch fish. Please respect the fishery and be courteous to others on the water.

This is a small quiet fishery that can be ruined by a few knuckle-heads running noisy motors or making too much ruckus on the water. Following the techniques from this site will give newcomers an idea of how to fish it without ruffling the feathers of the regulars.

Good Luck,



I caught this 38.5 salmon fishing at night on the American River.

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Tackle

Rod

A long, limber steelhead type rod is good for fighting salmon as long as it has enough backbone. I've tried a lot of different rods, and the one that I use the most often is a 8.5' medium graphite rod rated for 10-20 lb test. Your rod needs to be limber enough to absorb the violent head-shakes that salmon produce. Stiff rods mean lost fish.

Reel

Any mid-sized casting reel will work just fine. Spinning reels can be hard to use because it will be difficult to feel the bottom when letting out your line.



I like to use Abu-Garcia Revos. They are light and comfortable but have nice strong drags for fighting salmon.

Line

For my main line I like to use 30 pound test Power Pro braid. Braid gives you great sensitivity which helps you to feel the bottom and bites. For the leader I use 25 lb test P-line monofilament.



Head Lamp

A smart buy is a small head lamp that will give you hands free light when you need to check your bait or handle a landed fish.



Charge Box

Making your lure glow is crucial to this technique. Using a UV charge box will give you a better, longer-lasting glow than using camera flashes or spotlights. A great new product is the [ChargeBox Jr.](#) made by [OverBoard Industries, LLC](#). Charge up your glow tubes on the way out to your fishing spot and you are set!



You can order a ChargeBox Jr. here:
<http://www.overboardindustries.com/>

Net

Use the biggest legal landing net you can find. A long handle will help to reach for fish in the dark.

Lure

The lure we are using here is a glow-in-the-dark tube that looks kind of like an imitation squid. It is a tube bait normally used for black bass fishing. The tube is slid over a ½ ounce to 1.5 ounce dart head jig. Since we will be fishing at night, you want to buy a glow-in-the-dark tube.



There are several brands available. 'Select' brand makes the 'Gitzit'. The Radical Glow company also makes a salmon tube. The Radical Glow lures cost a little more but glow longer than the Gitzits.

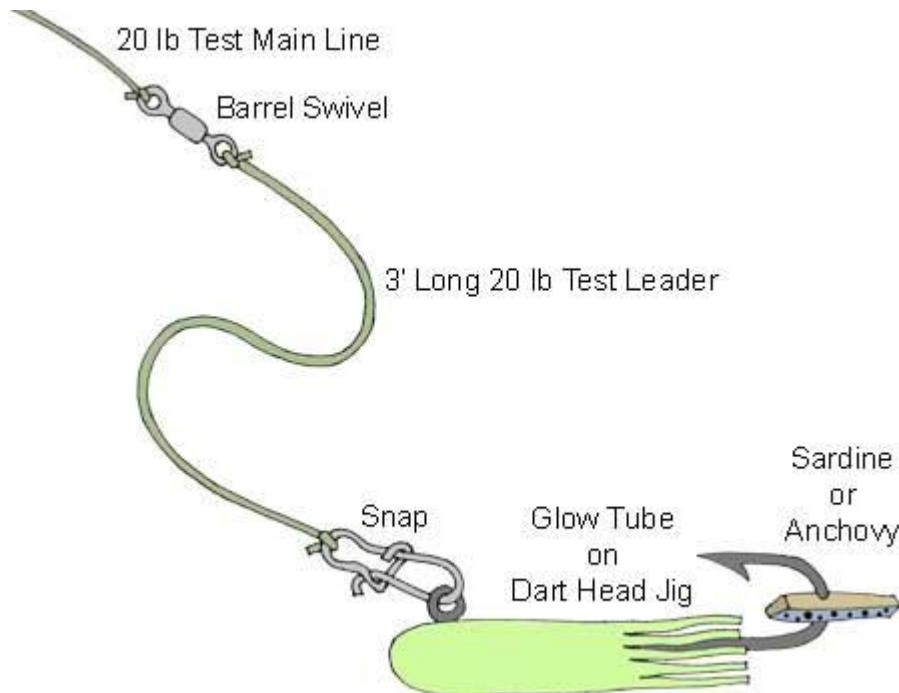
Bait

Add a small strip of sardine or anchovy to your hook. You will want to use a strip that is about 1" long by $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide. The best thing to do is to cut up several pounds of bait at home. After you have the bait cut into strips, put the chunks into plastic containers filled with non-iodized salt and baking soda. Now put the plastic containers into the freezer. This will allow the salt to draw moisture out of the bait which makes it tough and less prone to falling off of the hook. Do not use iodized table salt which has iodine added as a nutritional supplement. Salmon and other types of fish do not like the scent of iodine.

For some reason, adding bait will increase your odds of enticing a salmon to strike your lure. It may appeal to the salmon's instinct to strike, or perhaps it masks the odor of humans. The amino acid L-Lysine that is found on your hands is also produced by salmon predators like sea lions. Salmon are going to shy away from anything that reminds them of a predator. This is why I always wash my hand with scent-free sportsman's soap before handling my tackle. It's the little things that can make the difference between a good outing and getting skunked.

Setup

To my main line I attach a barrel swivel rated to at least 50 pounds. After the swivel I tie my leader line. I use P-line 25 pound test leader material for my leader line. I tie about a three to four foot leader which is then tied to a snap rated to at least 50 pound test. The snap is used to attach the lure.



Boat

Any boat that you can troll with an electric motor will work. Make sure that your running lights work since you will be navigating at night. For your rear (white) running light, get a dim bulb. Once your eyes adjust to the darkness, it will be easier to see by using the natural reflected city lights on the water. A bright light in your face will only end up blinding you. You will be fishing by feel so you don't need light to watch your rod.

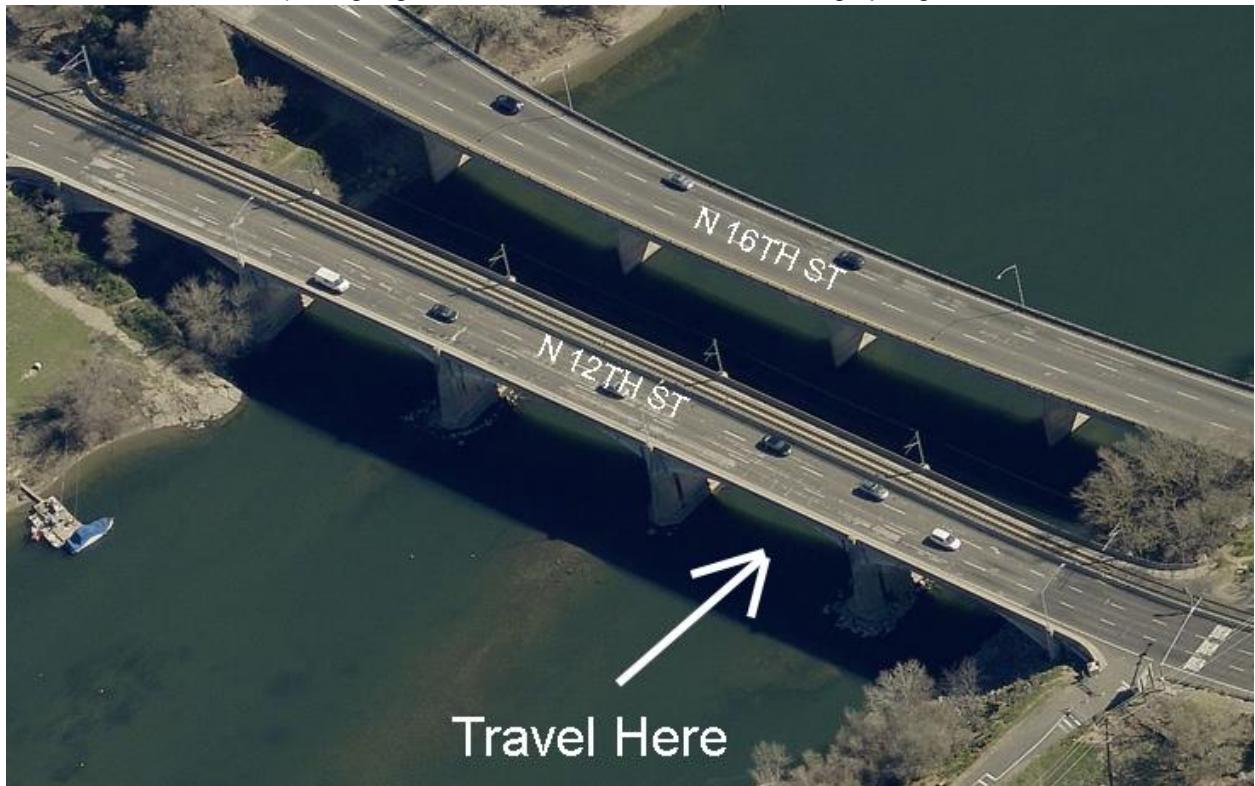
Small boats tend to work better in this area because they are more easily maneuvered in this potentially congested area. One very important tip I would like to add is this: always troll with electric motors - never gas. Gas motors spook the fish in the lower American because it is so calm and quiet up there. I've noticed that when a couple of boats get in there with gas motors the bite shuts off.

At a minimum you will want to use a depth finder. A better option will be a sonar unit. Although salmon are hard to detect in the ocean, they are easy to see in the river. Keep in mind that it is much easier to mark fish going downstream than it is going against the current.

Location

The techniques listed here work from the mouth of the American River at Discovery Park up to the Capital City Freeway Bridge near Cal Expo. The dredger holes start about one mile below the HWY 160 Bridge and continue up to the railroad bridge just downstream of the Capital City Freeway. Just look for areas between 14' and 25' deep. This is where you want to troll. If you are new to the area, watch the areas that other people are trolling. Once you get familiar with the popular areas, you can start exploring new areas to fish.

The water can get shallow in some areas. If you want to go upstream of the HWY 160 (N 12TH Street and N 16th Street) Bridge, go between the second and third bridge pilings as shown below.



Technique

Find a Spot

Move up into the American River before it gets dark if you can. This will allow you to scout out some areas if you are new to the waterway. Remember that there is a 5 mph speed limit on the entire river. Be courteous of other anglers. Ovoid moving though deep holes with your gas motor. This will spook the fish. Try to travel up to the fishing area on the south side of the river which tends to be about six to eight feet deep.

Once you find an area that is 12'-25' deep, shut off your gas motor and start trolling with your electric motor. I usually troll fairly slowly at about .5 to 1.5 mph. You will have to vary your throttle based on the current and river flow.

Light up your Glow Tube

Use your charge box to get a nice glow out of your lure. Once it's glowing, attach the bait to the lure before lowering it into the water. Lower your lure down until you feel a soft thud which means that it reached the bottom. Now reel up a couple of cranks. This puts your lure near the bottom where salmon are holding.

Tricks to Finding the Bottom

Feeling the bottom is probably the most difficult aspect to this style of fishing. Once it gets dark, you won't be able to watch your line to see when it stops. Night fishing with salmon tubes is very much a finesse fishing technique. Acquiring the sensitive touch for feeling the bottom and the strike of the salmon will take some time to master. When I take people out for the first time, these are the skills that take a while for new anglers to acquire. If you have problems feeling the bottom, there are a few remedies to try.

The first thing to do is switch to a heavier lure. Another thing to try is trolling downstream with the current. You can also switch to braided line which is much more sensitive than monofilament. This will create less water resistance on your line and it will be easier to feel the bottom.

When you let out your line, try this technique: Start out with your rod parallel to the water. Now, move your rod tip back towards the back of the boat. Stop your rod tip near the back of the boat, put your thumb on the spool and put your reel in free spool mode. Move your rod up towards the front of the boat. As you move your rod forwards, allow line to move off of the reel while using your thumb to prevent a backlash. Stop the spool with your thumb and slowly move the rod tip back towards the back of the boat. As you move the rod back, feel for the gentle thud of the bottom. Repeat these steps until you feel the bottom.

It is very important that you get the lure into the correct depth so that you stay in the strike zone. If you constantly find clams and debris after reeling up, you let out too much line and are dragging the bottom. If you see other people catching fish and you aren't getting any strikes, you are probably fishing too far off of the bottom. You want your lure 2-4 feet off the bottom at all times.

Work Your Rod Back and Forth

Once you have the lure at the correct depth, slowly work your rod tip forwards and backwards in about two foot intervals. Vary the speed and pattern throughout the night. This technique will give the lure an irregular raising/sinking and start/stop motion in the water. Count about two seconds bringing the rod forward and two seconds back. This is not jigging the bait, just slowing down and speeding up. The strike will almost always come on the back stroke.

Trolling

Check every once in a while to make sure your lure is glowing. You will also want to check your bait on occasion. Keep a constant eye on your sonar unit. Look for holes that are holding fish. Troll back and forth through the holes until the fish start biting.

Always watch your depth. If the river drops down, let your lure down to the bottom and reel it up a few cranks. If the bottom rises, reel up a few cranks. Try to keep your lure 2-4 feet from the bottom at all times.

You can troll both upstream and downstream. I've noticed that I tend to catch more female salmon going upstream while more males are caught going downstream with the current.

The Salmon Strike

Feel for strikes as you move your rod tip down towards the bottom. Salmon almost never strike while you raise your rod tip. Strikes are generally very light, and some people mistake them for debris hitting the line. As I mentioned before, this is finesse fishing. The strike usually produces a scraping or ticking sensation. If you feel a potential strike, gently raise the rod tip up a few inches. If you feel any pressure, set the hook. With monofilament, set the hook as hard as you can. If you are using braid, a short quick hook set will do. If you miss the fish, let the lure back down and continue to work the rod back and forth. You can often prompt fish to strike the lure again.

Fish On

Once you have the fish on, move out towards the middle of the river. This gets you away from snags along the river edges and also moves you out of the way of other anglers. Shut off the motor and fight the fish.

When the fish gets close to the boat you will be able to see the lure glowing in its mouth. Use this as a reference point when netting the fish. Do not use a light while landing or netting the fish. First off, it will excite the fish you are trying to land and make it more difficult to net. Secondly, shining spotlights into the water will spook other fish in the area. It will also annoy other anglers in the area. Once your eyes adjust to the darkness, it will actually be easier to see and net the fish without any lights.

If you decide to keep the fish, knock it out with a club. Bleed the fish by cutting the gills. This will remove unwanted blood from the meat and roe. Now put it on ice for the remainder of the night. Following these simple steps will ensure that you will have good quality meat and roe.

If you decide to practice catch and release, don't fight the fish too long. Salmon and steelhead build up lactic acid which can kill them in a long battle. If I plan on practicing catch and release, I purposely use heavier gear and hooks so that I can get the fish in quickly. Try to keep the fish in the water at all times and always revive the fish by moving it back and forth in the water until it swims off.

Here is a good link for catch and release guidelines:

[http://www.alaskafishing.com/ezlimit/
catch_release_done_right.html](http://www.alaskafishing.com/ezlimit/catch_release_done_right.html)

Bite Window

The time after twilight just as it begins to get dark always seems like the best time to get strikes. After the bite shuts off it can take several hours before the fish start biting again.

Times that salmon will bite are very unpredictable. They tend to bite during stretches that last about 20 minutes. Salmon will bite like crazy for about 20 minutes, and then without warning will stop biting all together. You need to take advantage of the times when they are biting! I've tried to analyze the times when salmon bite and I can't seem to figure out any pattern. I've looked at weather, moon phases, solunar conditions, dam releases and tides and I still can't predict when salmon will bite.

As with all fishing, you need to be in the right place at the right time. I've had nights where the bite lasted all night and we boated and released over twenty salmon. I've also had nights when the river is loaded with salmon and I can't get a bite all night. Welcome to fishing.

River Flows

River flows really affect this fishery. The best conditions seem to be when the dam releases are at about 2,000 CFS. The latest flows from the Nimbus Dam can be seen here:
<http://cdec.water.ca.gov/cgi-progs/queryDaily?NAT>

When the flows get below the 1,200 CFS threshold, this fishery can be really poor. The fish don't hold, and seem to blow through this section of water. In years when flows are low, this fishery is not very good. You are better off trolling during the daytime out in the Sacramento River.

Tips

- Don't anchor in any of the trolling lanes. I've never seen anybody do any good while anchored up there, and besides, you will block the anglers trying to troll.
- Try varying your speed if you don't get any strikes.
- The ideal depth for catching fish is 14'-19' deep.
- If you see a sea lion move to another location. Salmon will not bite when sea lions are present.
- Don't shine lights into the water or onto other boats. Try trolling when some knucklehead shines his 3 million candle power spotlight into your face. I've seen shouting matches break out over this one.
- Don't travel through holes using a gas motor.
- Don't cut off other anglers.
- Never use a gas motor while trolling.

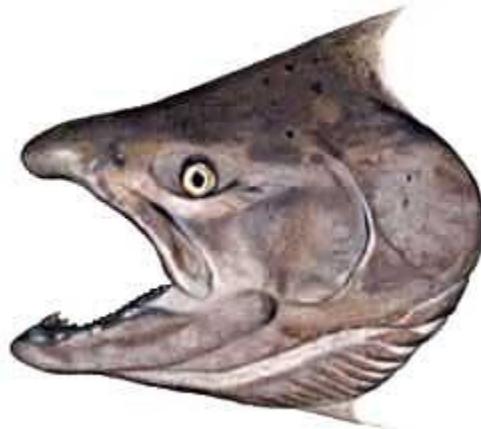
Conclusion

One last time, and I can't stress this enough - do not troll this area with a gas motor or anchor in any of the holes. You will spook the fish and ruin it for everyone. Trust me, I've tried everything - Kwikfish, spinners, spooning, etc. Nothing works better than using glow tubes. I've caught close

to 300 fish in this area and I've never caught one with a gas motor or while anchored. Stick to the techniques listed here and you will do really well once the fish arrive.

Fishing this area during the day is pretty much a waste of time. I've seen a few fish caught by people trolling Kwikfish, but for the most part these fish only hit at night and twilight some reason. Maybe the fish are spooked during the day because of the shallow and clear water conditions.

You'll notice that I've spent a lot of time here talking about etiquette. The lower American River is a small quiet fishery that can easily be ruined by a few rude or uninformed anglers. Follow the rules of navigation. When the river gets crowded, you will have to deal with a lot of other boats. When going head to head with another boat you always pass port side to port side (on the right, just like two cars going opposite directions would pass each other).



Please respect the river and the other anglers trying to enjoy the resource. With a little knowledge and common sense, this stretch of the river can be a great place to fish.