

Kenai Current



2016: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

With the 2016 season officially behind us, it's time to take a look back on yet another epic summer of Alaska Fishing. Without a doubt the most memorable aspect of this past season was the stronger king salmon returns. After three relatively dismal seasons and numerous restrictions, the more "normal" numbers of king salmon were a welcome sight on both the Kasilof and the Kenai in 2016.

The Kenai began the season closed to all king salmon fishing and the Kasilof opened with no bait and single hook along with no retention of wild king salmon except for Tuesdays and Saturdays. We started fishing the Kasilof in earnest beginning in mid-May and there were good signs that fish were already in the river in fairly decent numbers. Fish could be seen rolling in the larger holes and given ample effort, anglers were being rewarded with a mix of both wild and hatchery king salmon. As the season progressed into the first week of June, fishing pressure increased but so did the numbers of fish. A very high number of two ocean hatchery kings (kings that return after just two years in the salt) were present in the Kasilof this season and these fish in the 12-15 lb. range provided some outstanding action. There were also a good number of nice wild or naturally produced kings arriving with each tide as well. Indeed the Kasilof was off to a banner start!

On June 4, ADF&G revealed larger than expected numbers of Kenai Kings were being recorded and there was enough fish already in the river by June 4 to reopen the Kenai to catch and release fishing. This was welcome news and along with the strong numbers on the Kasilof, many were optimistic we may finally be on the leading edge of a rebound with our king stocks. Fortunately, the strong numbers of kings continued and along

with it, fishing success soared. On the Kasilof we saw some of the best fishing for king salmon we have seen in over a decade. In the past few years, stocking numbers have been increased on the Kasilof by over 50% so perhaps this bump in numbers, particularly hatchery fish, will be the trend for several years. It has been over a decade but this river once hosted one of the most prolific roadside king salmon fisheries in all of Alaska and some of the best king salmon fishing I have seen in 27 years of guiding. I am very optimistic that this year's numbers are evidence we can get back to those peak returns.

On June 16th, ADF&G announced the Kenai numbers were holding strong and the lower river a few miles below the Soldotna Bridge was open to harvest of kings. Additionally, on the Kasilof, all restrictions were lifted and bait was allowed along with multiple hooks and retention of wild fish on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. With fishing already what I considered good, the addition of bait was like a match to a powder keg.

Meanwhile on the Kenai, while most of the fishing effort focused on the lower Kenai where retention was allowed, we stayed in the section just above the Soldotna Bridge which remained open to catch and release fishing only.

(Continued on next page)



YEAR IN REVIEW: 2016

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It had been several seasons since we were able to fishing for kings in these "home" waters and this section definitely held some of my favorite king water on the entire Kenai. With the strong numbers and steady pulses of fish still arriving with each tide, fishing was remarkable. It was really gratifying not only to see the Kenai mirror its former stature, it was especially rewarding to see the numbers of big kings present. In a nutshell, mid to late June had an entirely different feel to it this year with the choice of great king fishing on both rivers!

The only ingredient missing from this June jubilation was the sockeye. Normally by this time, we are seeing limit catches of sockeye both on the upper Kasilof and in strategic locations along the Kenai. This year neither river really offered consistent sockeye fishing in June. It just goes to show; you never really know what mother natures has on tap.

As June passed and we moved into July, the regulations changed on both rivers. On the Kenai, despite the early run exceeding the pre-season forecast, the department elected to stick with their modest pre-season forecast for the late run and begin the season July 1st with no bait. This move seemed prudent given the low returns we have seen in recent seasons. Unfortunately, they elected to allow harvest upstream of the Soldotna bridge instead of limiting harvest to the lower river. Allowing retention river wide, even with a slot limit above the bridge through July 14th, seemed excessive. Conversely, the numbers of fish entering the river seemed to justify their actions and as the numbers grew with each passing day in July, it seemed clear we would be seeing another liberalization. On July 9th the river opened river wide to the use of bait. This made very good fishing great for a few days before things stabilized and remained consistent.

The one unfortunate consequence to a large early return and all the restrictions being lifted is this also unshackles the commercial fishing fleet and they were now being delivered their maximum fishing time in pursuit of both the late run kings and the more abundant late run sockeye. Once



their presence (both the shore-based set nets and the drift fleet) was in full swing, it became much less predictable on the river.

This year's sockeye return was very sporadic. We never saw that big 2-3 day push of fish where numbers spiked considerably. On the contrary, this year's return came in slow and steady and the fishing had an understandably similar pattern. While we certainly had many of what I would consider extremely productive days for sockeye, we did have a lot of trips where we had to really work hard for the fish. Sometimes having to exert that little extra effort makes the final result all the more rewarding. In any event it was a very successful late run sockeye season on the Kenai and we saw catchable numbers of reds up until around the 10th of August. King salmon fishing stayed consistent through the third week in July, but then fell off considerably in the final week of the season.

As always, this late July, early August time period is always a great time to seek out giant rainbow trout. Well-fed from the flash flood of sockeye carcasses, this stretch of the season always congregates the trout in certain sections of the river and it's a lot of

fun to catch and release that many big, wild rainbows in a day. We fish a number of trout enthusiasts annually that could travel anywhere to fish for wild bows and time after time they flock to the Kenai.



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Although reports were still sporadic, by August 10th it was time to transition from the waning sockeye run and looks to the next final phase of our salmon season...silvers. After what I consider to be some of the best silver returns we have experienced in many seasons, this year's Kenai silver salmon runs were mediocre at best. Typically by August 15th, the run is in full swing and limit catches are the rule. This year we did find silver limits on a regular basis but it took time and persistence as the fish were there. They were just not there in the strength we had seen the few years prior. This lower abundance can be attributed to a number of things but it is certainly a normal swing for Kenai silvers, which like all the salmon runs, are very cyclical in nature.



Despite the lower numbers which also carried over into the late run in September and October, we still saw some great coho fishing and the fish on average were larger in size. This was also an even year so it was a pink salmon season and they arrived on cue in late July and early August. Regularly returning by the millions, this year's pink or humpback salmon run was much like the silver return, below normal in numbers, but the individual fish were above average in size. The pinks were so big this year that in fact the state record was broken twice in the same day. The new record Alaska state pink salmon is now 13 pounds, 10.6 ounces, claiming the record over a 12 pound, 9-ounce fish caught on the Kenai in 1974.

We had a very warm fall here on the Kenai Peninsula with relatively mild temperatures throughout September and October. This made for a very enjoyable late season on the Kenai chasing trophy trout amidst the autumn backdrop of changing leaves and new snow in the mountains. With fewer silvers spawning this year, the trout were a little less selective and pounced on our offerings. Both flesh patterns

and single eggs were effective. We also enjoyed good fishing on the lower Kenai Peninsula streams like Deep Creek and the Anchor River for steelhead this fall and the warmer weather and favorable water conditions both contributed to this success.

Overall the 2016 season will be best be remembered for the bump in king salmon numbers and a return to more normal management actions regarding king salmon Peninsula wide. After going through a number of seasons where we saw little to no king fishing, seeing the rebound in king numbers on both the Kenai and the Kasilof was definitely a welcome change. We will remain cautiously optimistic that this trend will carry over to upcoming seasons and that our king salmon fishing will return to what many refer to as the "good ol' days."

Conversely, salmon are notorious for being predictably unpredictable so just as we saw a dip in silvers runs this year, you just never know from year to year what will come back. We are fortunate to have such a productive and resilient river with a diverse array of wild stocks. Despite the ups and downs, one can always rely on the Kenai and Alaska in general to provide a viable option and to make sure there is always something to catch. As we enter our 28th season, we are more excited than ever to see what Mother Nature has in store for us. We wish to thank everyone that helped to make 2016 such a great success and we look forward to sharing the 2017 season and many new adventures with friends both new and old.



Fish On!

EARLY RUN KASILOF KING FISHING ON FIRE

An increase in hatchery fish equals red hot king fishing!

If you are a long time visitor or resident to the Kenai Peninsula you can remember the Kasilof River back in the 1990's when it was teeming with kings throughout May and June. Many of these fish were hatchery produced, originating from the Crooked Creek Hatchery which was first established in the early 1970's. The initial smolt release occurred in 1975 and the planted fish were taken from wild Crooked Creek stock. Crooked Creek is a small tannin colored tributary to the Kasilof just above tidal influence. Since then, this stocking program has undergone a number of changes, the most notable being the number of smolt released annually. For most of the years up to the late 1990's, the smolt release averaged close to 200,000 fish. These numbers, combined with wild or naturally produced returns, created a robust road-side king fishery that rivaled any other in all of Alaska. As the Kenai drew more and more attention for its huge kings, the Kasilof always seemed to take a humble back seat and for many was a second option or plan B if the Kenai was restricted or unfishable for some reason. Eventually the Kasilof became more and more popular especially in the years when the Kenai was restricted due to low returns. During these years, it was common to see 75-100 drift boats a day during the peak of the run. Remarkably, the number of boats was hardly an



issue since everyone was catching fish. I can remember seasons where I got a limit for my clients on every single early season Kasilof king trip. It was such good fishing that I could literally predict places in the river where I could guarantee a take down. This all changed in 2000 when ADF&G decided to begin marking all Crooked Creek hatchery king salmon smolt by clipping their adipose fins. Amidst concerns over straying to other nearby river systems (primarily tributaries of the Kenai) and lack of funding to clip 200,000+ smolt, the department reduced stocking levels from 210,000 in 1999 to 105,000 in 2000. It did not take long before the reduction in smolt releases had an effect on fishing success. In a few short years the 50% reduction in hatchery fish resulted in noticeably lower catch rates on the river. New rules were put in place that limited the retention of wild or naturally produced Kasilof kings to certain days of the week while anglers could keep up to two hatchery fish seven days a week. The new rules and the two fish limit seemed a moot point during many subsequent seasons, as there were just not enough fish available to make a two fish limit a realistic goal. As expected the reduced catch rates eventually affected the overall popularity of the Kasilof early run king fishery and participation plummeted. Competent drift boat guides that were willing to work very hard for their clients still found adequate success and with fewer boats and less competition, the Kasilof was still a very enjoyable fishery and a quality guided trip.

Fast forward to 2016. After more than a decade of reduced returns, last year was a game changer. Fishing began and continued to be a bit more productive than we have seen in several seasons and there seemed to be a significantly higher number of smaller hatchery kings available. These 8-12 lb. kings are fish that have only spent two years in the ocean before returning to spawn. A certain percentage of the run always returns as two ocean but the majority return after three years in the salt. This means given the extreme abundance of 2-ocean hatchery fish in 2016, 2017 is likely to be equally productive with the bulk of the fish being larger 18-25 lb. kings! Why the additional hatchery fish? ADFG has begun to expand stocking numbers in recent years. Starting in 2014, the department has increased the smolt release from 105,000 to 140,500 and hopes to double the hatchery return in coming seasons. For a guide, that is music to my ears. Looking back on those many years of absolutely wide-open and incredible king fishing, I did not realize how lucky we were. In my youth, I assumed this was Alaska and this was just the way it is. Now I know just how important the hatchery numbers were to the overall number of kings and with those number now again on the rise, I feel we are in for some great early season king fishing over the next several years.



A KING FOR A KIWI



Prior to this past season, it had been several summers since I guided for kings on the Kenai. With low returns and restrictions, we largely refocused our efforts on the more abundant and predictable sockeye salmon. 2016 seemed to be a pivotal moment for the Kenai with improved king salmon returns not only here, but also across the state. Finding myself fishing the middle river just outside my home was like a blast from the past. It was actually very nostalgic to finally wet a line in the many fabled holes I had frequented so many times in my 27-year guiding career. While I was lucky enough to have several world-class king salmon swim into my net this past season, one fish in particular was special. It was the second trip chasing kings with a jolly crew from New Zealand that told me they sometimes fish entire seasons back home for a single salmon.

During their first trip, they all landed and released trophy Kenai Kings and a couple of the guys landed multiple fish. Needless to say, spirits were high for day two and while we were not quite as fortunate as we were in the first trip, we had managed a pretty decent morning with 4-5 very nice ocean bright kings released by mid-day. Indeed it had been a couple of literally epic days of king fishing with a great group of people that truly appreciated the quantity and the quality of the kings we were able to catch and release. Yet despite the nearly perfect two days of fishing, there was just one hiccup. The elder statesmen of the party, the esteemed Clarence Whiting, had yet to land a true trophy. He had lost a few good ones and landed some smaller fish, but he had yet to do battle with the Kenai's most reputable inhabitant: a giant king salmon. As we began fishing the last few holes of the day, I decided to pull into a small piece of holding water just below a large rock formation. The turbid water pushed my boat around in the heavy current as I held my boat in place and motioned the Kiwis' let their lines out. As they clicked the reels into gear and I slowly began backing down the hole, I heard the inside, side rod holder make that telltale creak and I looked over just as the 10.5 foot rod buried to its backbone in the rod holder. Line was pouring off the reel despite a tight drag and it was all Clerry could do to get the rod out of the holder. Upon finally freeing up the rod from the holder the fish made a sharp cut for the middle of the river and took several other lines with him. After a frenzy of untangling, cutting and praying, we managed to clear the other lines and follow the fish. From the moment it bit I knew this was no ordinary king and now as it held to the bottom and put the heavy salmon rod to its deepest arc, I know it was big. The stalemate ensued for several minutes as the weight of the fish and its sheer force would not allow the strength of our tackle to do anything but hold on and keep the 80 lb. braid tight. Remarkable after what looked like would be hours, the giant decided to swim for the surface and for a split second swam parallel with the surface just long enough to make an extended reach and present the net ahead of the fish. To my amazement, it barely swam in and then accelerated to the bottom of the bag as I extended at full stretch. I can remember thinking I cannot wait to get a full look at how big this fish really is. As I cradled the net against the gunnel, we gently nudged the boat against the nearby shoreline as Clarence and I immediately exited the boat and prepared for the release. We managed a handle full of decent photos and allowed a brief second to marvel



at the sheer girth of this magnificent chinook. I can keenly remember my inability to even come close to getting a hand around its tale and then being helpless when trying to roll its belly for a picture. There was no budging it and it felt like trying to pose with the rear quarter of a bull moose. As we held it by the tail, it quickly regained great strength and splashed us all as it charged back out into the glacial current. We did not take the time to measure it and obviously we let it go so we will never know exactly what it weighed. I think I have a very good idea and the award-winning taxidermist that is doing a reproduction mount has similar speculations but it really is not very important. The fact that we were able to catch such a unique trophy and release it unharmed was something all present will remember forever. It was a great exclamation point, not just for Clarence but also for the whole group. I look forward to their return and hopefully someday I can take them up on the gracious offer to visit them in New Zealand!



SOCIAL MEDIA



Indeed, we are living in different times and social media is definitely becoming a huge player in how people communicate not only about life in general but also with hunting and fishing. Two social media platforms that lend themselves well to Alaska Fishing are both Facebook and Instagram. We are encouraging all of our past, present and future guests to join us on these exciting new methods of communication and to make it easy we have listed how and where you can join us online if you have not already done so.



www.facebook.com/mgfalaska This is our official Alaska Fishing with Mark Glassmaker Facebook Page. Here you will find frequently updated information on our business including but not limited to fishing pictures, important Alaska Fisheries information/news, in-season fishing reports and updates and much more. If you have not already done so, please “like” our page so you can follow along!



www.facebook.com/groups/AlaskaFishingJunkies Alaska Fishing Junkies is a group page on Facebook that I created for Alaska Fishing enthusiasts worldwide. It is a fun, family oriented page where you can see a variety of different posts pertaining to Alaska and Fishing in general. This a great place to post any questions you may have about fishing the Greatland and a great source of current news related to not only the Kenai Peninsula but also the entire state of Alaska. This a closed group, which means you must request permission to join. To do this simple do a search on Facebook for Alaska Fishing Junkies and send a request to join. One of our admins. will approve your request ASAP!



www.instagram.com/mgfalaska Instagram is more of a picture-posting site but it is also a great way to share videos and other information with like-minded friends. It is also a great way to connect with other people interested in fishing and specifically fishing Alaska! To see what we are posting weekly, please feel free to follow and share our page and even though we are relatively new to this platform, we look forward to building a very diverse, numerous and worldwide following.

Alaska Fishing

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- Kenai Full Day \$275
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*All prices are per person, price may vary depending on location. Please call or visit our website for the many additional fly out options available.

All Fishing Trips Include: All fishing gear while guided (rods, reels, bait, etc.) and experienced guide with boat. Snacks and refreshments will be provided on both half and full day river trips. Your fish will be cleaned and prepared for freezing. Additional processing including vacuum sealing, smoking and shipping services are available for an additional fee. We recommend having your catch vacuum sealed and boxed for the flight home. You will be responsible for purchasing an Alaska Sportfishing License, including king stamp (if fishing for king salmon). River trips depart daily from one of several boat launches on the Kenai River.

*Trip duration may be shorter if and when a limit is achieved.

For Reservations: Once you have decided on lodging and fishing dates, we will send you an invoice detailing the cost(s) for your trip and required non-refundable deposit. Once we receive your deposit, we will mail you a confirmation receipt, a detailed itinerary and directions to your accommodations. Final payment is due thirty (30) days prior to arrival. We accept Visa/Mastercard/American Express/Discover, personal checks and money orders.

Cancellation Policy: Deposits are non-refundable with limited exceptions in cases of extreme hardship.

Limits of Responsibility: "Alaska Fishing with Mark Glassmaker" reserves the right to alter any package or itinerary as existing conditions may require. All rates quoted are based on current rates at the time of this printing and are subject to availability and/or change without notice.

Not included with your trip: Gratuities, air fare, car rental, meals, Alaska state fishing license, fish processing and air freight charges for fish.

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Cabins include all cooking and eating utensils, bed and bath linens, full-size gas range with oven, full-size refrigerator, microwave oven and outdoor gas barbecue. Cabins are additionally equipped with satellite television, WiFi and telephone.



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 \$250 per night for four (July)
 \$225 per night for four (June, Aug.)



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 \$200 per night for four (June, Aug.)



EDGEWATER TWO



\$250 per night for four (May, Sept.)
 \$300 per night for four (July)
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KATHY NYE RELEASES A MINT
BRIGHT KENAI KING IN JULY.



THE PYLE PARTY WITH A
GOOD HAUL OF HALIBUT FROM
COOK INLET.



MIKE SAWYER WITH ONE OF
MANY KENAI KINGS HE LET GO
IN LATE JUNE.