

The *season* of *salmon*

Columbia-Pacific sport-fishers say hello to summer

Story and photos by LYNETTE RAE McADAMS

"I have lived! The American Continent may now sink under the sea, for I have taken the best that it yields, and the best was neither dollars, love, nor real estate. ... I was up the bank lying full length on the sweet-scented grass and gasping in company with my first salmon caught. My hands were cut and bleeding, I was dripping with sweat, spangled like a harlequin with scales, wet from the waist down, nose peeled by the sun, but utterly, supremely, and consummately happy."

—Rudyard Kipling, *nobel laureate, upon catching his first salmon on a tributary of the Columbia River, 1891*

It's good to know that some things never change.

Ask Kendra Lispie, age 10, about the best part of her first time salmon fishing, and she'll be hard-pressed to offer you an answer. "The whole thing was my favorite," she says, refusing to discriminate. "I loved going over the waves. I was worried about getting seasick, and it didn't happen, so that made everything even better. And catching my fish — that was really amazing. I definitely want to do it again and again."

It's as near to perfect as an early summer day can be — a light breeze, blue skies shining

— and though she's likely unaware, Lispie has now joined the ranks of countless anglers who have come before her, all flocking here annually for more than a century, hot on the trail of the region's most famous resident. Whether or not she becomes a lifelong devotee to the sport, only time will tell, but according to Doug McCully, of Long Beach, Washington, there's one thing for sure: She'll never forget that first salmon.

An avid fisherman, who spends at least four days a week on the water during peak season, McCully takes only a split second to think back more than 54 years and recall one of his own summer days at the age of 10. "I'm telling you, it was unreal — you can't even describe it in words, this feeling that comes over you. I was so excited I was shaking." His strong voice waxes unusually sweet and soft, his tone rich with the romance of memory. "That was the first time I got excited about a fish, having it on the end of my line, thrashing back and forth and up and down. I can remember watching it dance out over the water, just praying it wouldn't jump off my hook. Having something like that happen," he says, "especially when you're young, it's a truly unique experience. It hooked me for life."

Whether it's your first season out there or only one of many, this year's salmon runs are looking likely to afford a lot of opportunity for making more happy memories. "Things started a little slow, but they're picking up now," says Wendy Beeghly, a fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "In fact, for ocean salmon, from the Columbia all the way to the Canadian border, Ilwaco's seen the best fishing so far." (Pure music to the ears of local anglers.) "We're excited about the season ahead, and all indications are that it should be a good one."

That seems especially true if you're looking to hook a Chinook — that mighty king of salmon — whose current runs are strong and far above average, even better than 2014, which saw some of the healthiest returns in recent history.

"Of course," adds Beeghly, nicely elucidating the unfortunate First Law of fishing, "numbers of fish out there doesn't have much to do with catching them."

But that's where people like Rob Gudgell come in.

Gudgell made his first trip over the Columbia River bar at the ripe old age of 5. By the time he turned 7 he was steering his



Daniel Burt, a deckhand with Pacific Salmon Charters, carries a client's fresh catch. Deckhands are the backbone of service in the charter fishing world; they bait your hook, net your fish, do all the cleaning, and work hard to keep you (and the captain) happy. Here's a tip: Tip them!



Rob Gudgell, owner and captain, stands aboard the Katie Marie, one of eight charter fishing boats operated by Pacific Salmon Charters in Ilwaco, Washington.



A trio of freshly caught Chinook (or King) salmon.

Catch them while you can!

Oregon and Washington's 2015 recreational salmon fishing season is already underway. The following restrictions apply, and are subject to change as quotas are met. Keep checking www.dfw.state.or.us (Oregon) and www.wdfw.wa.gov (Washington) for regular updates.

OCEAN
May 30 – June 12: Hatchery Chinook only, 2 per day.
June 13 – Sept. 30: Chinook and hatchery coho, 2 per day (only one can be a Chinook)

COLUMBIA RIVER
(Tongue Point to Buoy 10)
Aug. 1 – Sept. 7: Chinook and hatchery coho, 2 per day (only one can be a Chinook)
Sept. 8 – 30: hatchery coho, 2 per day (all Chinook must be released)
Oct. 1 – Dec. 31: Chinook and hatchery coho, 2 per day, any combination.



Booking space on a charter boat is a hassle-free way to go fishing. If you've enough people in your party, you can even rent the whole boat, like this family did during the early days of 2015's salmon season.



Members of the charter fleet line the marina during the opening days of summer salmon fishing at the Port of Ilwaco, Washington.



Submitted photo courtesy of the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum. This historic photo shows Lauretta Hughes, "lady winner" of the 1949 Chinook salmon derby, standing with her prize catch; the salmon is estimated to weigh about 45 pounds.

father's boat, lending his hand to the family business — Pacific Salmon Charters, out of Ilwaco, Washington — and learning every aspect of our local waters. For him, thinking like a salmon is practically second nature.

Though he's held his Master's license since the age of 18 and has logged thousands of days in pursuit of fish, Gudgell says his work still brings a thrill. "The first-timers are always my favorites," he says, "especially kids. It just puts a smile on your face to watch them. And the camaraderie that develops on a boat is really pretty cool. I've got customers who've been coming out with me for 20 years and more. I have to say, we've made a lot of

real friendships."

Quick to affirm the early reports of success out of his home port, Gudgell says, "We've been doing just outstanding on the kings so far, and it really takes some skill in targeting them. They're awfully fun to catch, and such a nice, prime, good-eating fish."

Like any experienced captain, he's long on advice about how to plan for being on the water; not surprisingly, he says the fastest way to ruin a good day's fishing has everything to do with the night before. "People come out here to have a good time and catch some fish, and the worst thing you can do is show up drunk or hungover. It almost a guarantee that you'll be seasick, and it's not fun at all. We just don't accept that on any of our boats."

Beyond that, his best tips are the most basic:

"Dress appropriately," he says. "A lot of people come down from the valley, and they leave 90-degree temperatures for a 50-degree coast, and show up without even a sweatshirt. It can get cold on the water fast, so we always advise people layer up. That, and, well, this

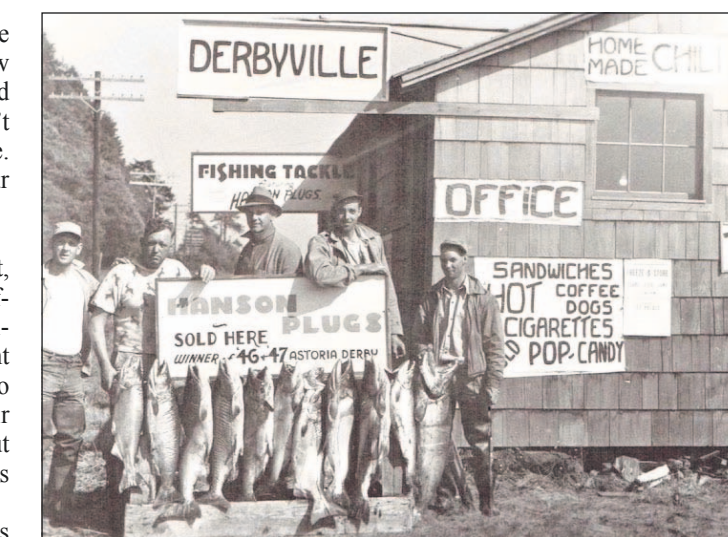
'I've got customers who've been coming out with me for 20 years and more. I have to say, we've made a lot of real friendships.'

one's kind of new, but it's becoming more and more true," he says, adding, "The new generation fishes with their fingers attached to their little machines, and you just can't hook a fish if you're hooked to your device. You need to be checking your pole, not your phone."

Sage words, hopefully duly noted.

As to the season ahead, Gudgell says that, as always, he's most looking forward to offering his customers an exceptional experience. "I don't just want it to be good, I want it to be a great event for them. I want them to come back again and again and tell all their friends, 'Hey, he's a codgy old S.O.B., but man, we have a lotta fun, and he sure knows how to find the fish.'"

Leaving off with some final predictions for what everyone hopes will be another year of the salmon, Gudgell says, "There's enough out there for everybody. It's gonna be good, it's gonna last, and limits will be the norm, not the exception."



Submitted photo courtesy of the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum. Sportsmen of the late 1940s stand with their fish beside a store in Derbyville, Washington. The "town" consisted mainly of campgrounds and bait and tackle shops, and operated only seasonally; it was located just west of the present-day Astoria-Megler bridge near Fort Columbia State Park.