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# Alaska-bound anglers say thumbs up for pinks



**Next:** Costume and set design exhibit 'Grand Illusion' Feb. 12 at Library of Congress

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Two good old boys and two gals pose with the catch of the day at Joe Connor's Big Sky Charter & Fishcamp, Kenai Peninsula.

*Courtesy of ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld*

For [Alaska](#)-bound travelers heading to the [Kenai Peninsula](#) this month and next, the latest report indicates that salmon [fishing](#) will continue to be among the bounteous variety of outdoor recreation available to visitors.





Courtesy of @Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

Despite this summer's low king salmon numbers, biologist Jason Pawluk, with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, says that pink salmon runs "on the lower Kenai are coming through early and so far their numbers are very good." Speaking to the Peninsula Clarion, Pawluk said that "pinks are "a great fishery for those who still want to put some fish in the freezer....and for young anglers to learn how to fish, as they – the pinks – are in high abundance and they strike at most any lure."

Small numbers of sockeye salmon are also still swimming in both the Kenai and the Kasilof rivers, according to Pawluk. But the smaller tributaries above both river drainages are currently proving the most successful place to fish. As for coho salmon (silvers), fishing has been slow since the season opened July 1, but conditions are likely to improve.

As out-of-state anglers have learned, fishing for sockeye on the 300-foot wide stretches of the middle and lower [Kenai River](#) is nothing like fly fishing on a winding mountain stream. Arriving as early as 4 a.m., hard-core fishermen come prepared to stay until dusk, packing an ice chest with lunch and drinks and parking along the highway or in a nearby campground. The goal is to stake out an uncrowded stretch of river bank within walking distance.

Catching the fish is another matter. Instead of casting overhand, smart anglers swing the rod in a side-hand jerk that drops the lure no more than 20 to 30 feet out into the stream. Immediately reeling it in, they cast again, and then again, over and over. If dozens, or hundreds, literally, of sockeye are on the move, swimming upstream, they'll see the lure glint near the surface.

"The fish aren't hungry, but when they see that hook slide by, some'll take a swipe at it," says Joe Connors, whose [Big Sky Charter & Fish Camp](#) -- with rods, reels, licenses for sale, and rental cabins -- perches on a private stretch of the river bank, in Sterling. "When you feel a tug, yank it hard. The fish are there if you're patient."

By 9 a.m., fishermen crowd the river banks, standing 20 feet apart from each other, between the bushes, at the base of steep banks or in the shallows. It's chaotic and clumsy, but a tradition that no "sourdough," – aka card-carrying Alaska resident – would ever miss, and that visitors from the lower 48, on vacation, usually pass up in favor of two intense days of fishing with a guide and a boat.

"Visitors can fish off our dock, or we'll take them out in the speed boat, to fish in the quiet places where we know the fish group together to rest," says Bill White Jr., at the [Alaska Sports Lodge](#), whose half-dozen fishingcabins, also in Sterling, face the river.

Because the commercial fishing industry erects giant set nets in the ocean in front of the lower Kenai and Kasilof Rivers, netting thousands of spawning sockeye, spawning king salmon (chinooks), largest of the salmon species, are accidentally -- but inevitably -- snared as well. The result is that the kings never reach the trophy fishermen waiting for them upriver, big-spending sportsmen who support the [Kenai Peninsula's](#) economy.

Global competitors, these fishermen rent SUVs, lease cottages and condos, hire guides and motorboats, buy out-of-state licenses and process their fish at local freezing plants, which package and mail them home. They

eat at restaurants, buy snacks, groceries, liquor, beer and clothes and invest in replacement fishing gear. The commercial fisheries pay wages to their workers. But sportsmen's dollars whole communities.

And nowadays, so does tourism. The **Kenai Peninsula**, a wilderness as spectacular as the Tetons and as big as Massachusetts and Connecticut together, is Alaska in miniature with something from everywhere, all within three to five hours' drive from Anchorage.

Hiking trails climb through the glacier-capped Kenai Mountains, in the **Chugach National Forest**. Stream-fed valleys shelter brown bears, wolves and eagles. Coasts on three sides offer deep water fishing. And towns provide lodging, shopping, history and local color. Wildlife cruises in Resurrection Bay look for whales, otters, seals, sea lions, puffins, eagles and kittiwakes. And some of the continent's top seafood restaurants are here.

Back in the day you had to find the gold by yourself. Now there are maps, guides and outfitters to show the way, from pre-European archeological sites, pioneer history and dog sledding to ice-climbing, **river rafting**, glacier flight-seeing and rustic cabins. And for fishermen on hand this month, the pinks are swimming.

Visit Anchorage at [www.anchorage.net](http://www.anchorage.net); the Kenai Peninsula at [www.kenaipeninsula.org](http://www.kenaipeninsula.org); the Seward Windsong lodge at [www.sewardwindsong.com](http://www.sewardwindsong.com); lodging at [www.alaskasportslodge.com](http://www.alaskasportslodge.com), or at [www.kenaguide.com](http://www.kenaguide.com); and river rafting and floating at [www.AlaskaRiverAdventures.com](http://www.AlaskaRiverAdventures.com).

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