

Fresh from the open ocean, adult king salmon put up a spectacular fight in the confining waters of a river mouth.

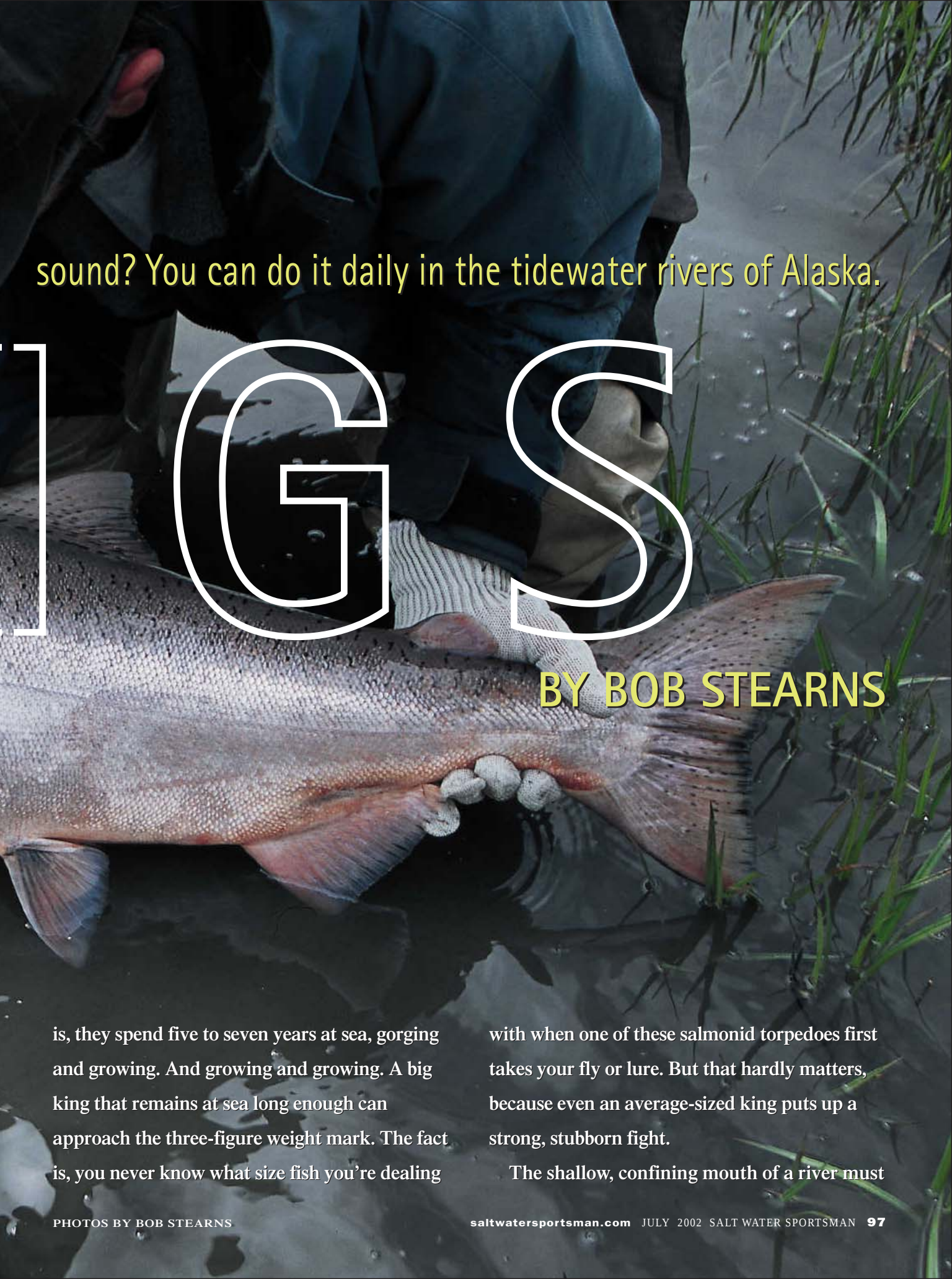
How does taking a 50-pound king salmon on fly or light tackle

Rivers of KING

Even though I live in Florida and spend a great deal of time fishing in the tropics, the king salmon has become one of my favorite salt water species, thanks in large part to its size and fighting abilities. My preferred venue for taking

on these grand game fish is the tidal sections of coastal rivers, especially those in western Alaska that flow into the Bering Sea.

As any chinook aficionado already knows, king salmon are a five- to seven-year fish. That

A person wearing a blue jacket and gloves is holding a large salmon in a river. The fish is silver with a pinkish-red hue on its side and tail. The background shows water and some green vegetation.

sound? You can do it daily in the tidewater rivers of Alaska.

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BY BOB STEARNS

is, they spend five to seven years at sea, gorging and growing. And growing and growing. A big king that remains at sea long enough can approach the three-figure weight mark. The fact is, you never know what size fish you're dealing

with when one of these salmonid torpedoes first takes your fly or lure. But that hardly matters, because even an average-sized king puts up a strong, stubborn fight.

The shallow, confining mouth of a river must

be a frightening place for a big salmon that has spent all of its growing years in the open sea. Perhaps that's why so many of them — especially the larger fish — pass back and forth between the river mouth and the adjacent bay or sea several times before making the final commitment to fresh water. This behavior has been observed, and explains why so many of the larger fish have already started to turn red when taken in salt water.

From an angling standpoint, I see this anxious in-and-out behavior as a blessing. For one thing, it provides more opportunities to present a fly or lure to any given fish. And



Kings often move in and out of the river several times before making a final push to their fresh water spawning grounds, which is why some fish caught in salt water exhibit a red hue.

if there's one certainty in this picture, it's that the kings in tidewater have not forgotten how to bite something that looks like food (kings stop feeding once they enter fresh water). The strike is sudden and electric, and when the line tightens the sensation is akin to hooking a passing bus.

Perhaps it's the shallow water, but many of these kings go airborne once hooked. Some do it just once, but a few jump two or three times. Others simply put their head down and start swimming away very rapidly. Either way, you're in for a tough fight.

Current Makes a Difference

My favorite way to take tidewater kings is on fly gear or light baitcasting tackle. It happens that the tidewater portion of most rivers is made to order for the fly angler. Even the straightest runs usually have spots where upstream-bound fish will slow or even hold for a while. These places typically feature a ledge, depression, bar or some other underwater topography that causes a change in current flow. Sometimes, the "softer" water along the outside edge of a current seam is all that's needed to make them happy. All of these spots deserve careful exploration with an eye toward what the tide is doing.

At times, the best fishing takes place dead in the center of the channel. Keep in mind that the strongest currents occur during the outgoing tide because they are reinforced



by fresh water flowing downstream. But an incoming tide opposes the river's flow, diminishing the current sharply. This often makes fish moving upriver feel more comfortable in the middle part of the river.

Slow current also makes it easier to get a fly down to where the kings are swimming or holding, which often is halfway between the bottom and the surface. In stronger currents, the fish often hug the bottom. Traveling fish sometimes roll or porpoise on the surface as they move, especially if there's little or no wind, and this provides some indication of the "lane" they're using. So while the plug fisherman



Some chinook jump when hooked, while others simply make a beeline for open water. Either way, they'll fight hard to the end.

must often resort to trolling when there's little or no current, the fly angler has a made-to-order situation.

During periods of strong current, big-lipped diving plugs like the Wiggle Wort can be fished from a stationary boat, using the current to provide the action. Under these conditions, the fly angler has to locate places where underwater structure creates slower water.

King Tackle

When it comes to fly fishing for big kings, I prefer two rods: a nine- and a ten-weight. Except for those periods

when the flooding tide has brought the current to a near standstill, sinking lines are the norm.

For those of you who are into shooting heads, you'll need three sink rates: 250-300 grain, 400-450 grain, and 550-600 grain. I use 40-pound-test Amnesia monofilament as my running line because its diameter is large enough to handle comfortably (especially when striking a big fish), and it doesn't tangle nearly as easily as the thinner stuff. If you're more comfortable with a full fly line, something in the Scientific Anglers Wet Tip Express series will get the job done nicely.



Rods rigged with shooting heads and 40-pound-test mono running lines are the tools anglers need to present the most reliable dark-pink fly patterns to summer chinook.

The idea is to get the fly or lure down to the proper level, so you must try to envision how high in the water

column the fish are likely to be. Kings are not bottom feeders, and will seldom swim downward to take a lure or fly. However, they will often rise a few feet or so for something they want, so pay special attention to the last part of the retrieve. More than once I've had a big king chase a fly almost to the surface before striking.

River-mouth water is almost always more turbid than upstream or even offshore water. Because of this, and perhaps for other reasons, the kings here will readily attack a fly that's much larger than one you might typically use upriver. I like bulky flies tied with flexible material that has a lot of inherent action, especially marabou and bunny-strip streamers in the 3 1/2- to five-inch range, with some thin strands of flashy material (e.g., Krystal Flash) tied on top. Dumbbell eyes in various weights can be added to make the fly sink faster.

Think Pink!

If I had to pick one fly color for this type of fishing, it would be dark pink. Other colors that have worked well over

the years include black, orange, bright blue, bright pink, purple, chartreuse and silver, in various combinations. The same applies to plugs and jigs.

King salmon are big fish, and in most rivers tend to seek the deepest water. The tidal stretches of the Bering Sea rivers I've fished vary from five to 20 feet deep, with current speeds ranging from nil to moderately strong, depending on the tide. Most of the best fishing is usually done from an anchored boat because it takes just the right position to get the fly down to where the fish live. If you've never done this sort of thing before, you should try it first with a friend who knows, or a guide. Once you get comfortable with the techniques involved, you'll be surprised how often you hook up.

Keep in mind that, for the most part, king salmon tend to prefer a fly or lure that wiggles and darts. I've certainly hooked more than one king while the fly was simply hanging steady in the current behind the boat, but stripping the line draws far more strikes. I vary the retrieve strips from

short and fast to longer and somewhat slower. Changing speed during the retrieve is a good idea, too. It really pays to experiment.

A shock leader is not necessary for even the biggest kings, but a strong tip-pet is called for because these fish have great endurance, and you don't want to spend a long time trying to land one. Use at least 12-pound test, but if there's a lot of current, consider 16 to 20. Also, *never* forget to re-tie the fly after each fish, as the slightest nick can spell disaster on the next hook-up. I learned this lesson the hard way.

Really big kings, especially those 40 pounds and up, are very difficult to bring to net in a strong current. The best way to deal with this is to pull anchor and head for shore once you are sure the hook-up is solid. Try to get downcurrent from the fish to make it fight the flow of water, as well as the pressure of the rod. If a big king gets too far below you, bringing it back against the current can become an impossible task.

Right now the future of these

Catching Up with **KINGS**

Among the most productive rivers for tidewater king fishing are those flowing into the Bering Sea. If you hit the peak season — the last half of June through the third week of July — just right, you will find excellent fishing.

I have fished this area via the Goodnews River Lodge for many years now, and have found that it's common to hook ten kings or more a day. The average weight is 25 to 30 pounds, but last year I beached three fish that were over 50 pounds,

plus many over 40. Fly anglers typically get seven to ten strikes per day during the peak weeks of the run; on plug or spin the numbers are even greater.

For more information on the Goodnews River Lodge, call (800) 274-8371, fax (888) 274-9778, or visit their website at www.epicfishing.com. Weekly rates (six full days of fishing) range from \$4,250 to \$5,150 per person and include the round-trip charter flight from Anchorage to camp. — *Bob Stearns*

splendid mammoths of the trout family looks bright — at least in some of the relatively unspoiled rivers in the Pacific Northwest, and especially in Alaska. Highly productive fish farming in Europe and South America has brought about plunging prices for salmon in

U.S. markets, which has reduced commercial fishing in many areas, leaving wild fish free to roam. In an age where game fish stocks have been taking a beating worldwide, it's nice to know that at least some fisheries are actually improving with time.