

Trolling for Salmon on the California Delta and Sacramento Area

Chinook salmon make their way up the California Delta in large numbers between August and November of each year. They eventually spawn in the upper regions of the Sacramento, American, Feather, Mokelumne and Cosumnes Rivers. A great way to target these large game fish is by trolling.

The methods I'm going to cover here apply to the deep, slow moving water in the lower end of the river system between Verona and Rio Vista. Different methods are used in the shallow, rocky, fast moving sections found farther upstream.

Good Luck,



This 19 pound hen salmon slammed a Silvertron spinner near Garcia Band in Sacramento in 2011

Contents

Tackle.....	3
Rod	3
Reel	3
Main Line	3
Net	3
Setup	4
Boat	4
Locations	5
Popular Locations on the Sacramento River (listed upstream to downstream)	5
Popular Locations on the Mokelumne River	5
Boat Launches (listed upstream to downstream).....	5
Lures	6
Spinners.....	6
Cut Plugs	7
Wobbling Plugs.....	8
Technique.....	9
Direction.....	9
Depth.....	9
Scents	9
Setbacks	9
The Salmon Strike.....	9
Fish On	9
Bite Window	10
Tips.....	11

Tackle

Rod

You'll want to use limber salmon or steelhead medium heavy rod rated for 10-30 lb test. They usually run eight to ten feet in length. A fairly soft tip is needed to detect the action of your lure. The long limber rods are needed to help absorb the head shakes of salmon once you hook them. I normally use 8'6" salmon rods.

Reel

Any midsized reel will work just fine. I like to use Abu-Garcia Ambassadeur model 6500 series casting reels. I use the left hand retrieve 6501 C3 model for my own needs.

If possible, use a reel with a clicker so that you can hear the line peel out when a fish is hooked in the rod holder. It also helps to have a line counter reel.



Main Line

I use 65 pound test braided line. Braided line doesn't stretch, so be sure to use a long limber rod, and keep the drag nice and loose. Power Pro brand is a proven choice.



Net

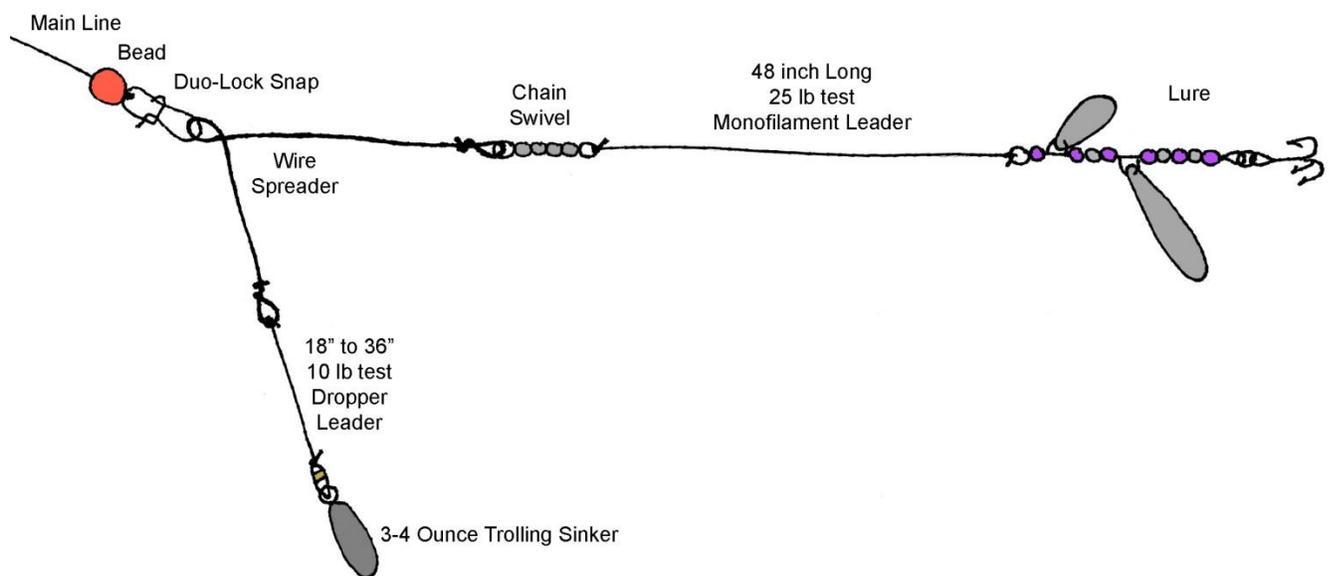
Use the biggest net you can find within regulation. I like a long handle for reaching out for fish going crazy at the boat.

Setup

Most people use a 'V' shaped metal wire called a spreader to separate their lures and sinkers. The advantage to using a spreader is that keeps the lure up in the strike zone while the sinker remains down on the bottom.

On the top leg of the spreader I tie a 48 inch long monofilament 25 pound test fluorocarbon leader to my lure.

On the bottom leg of the spreader I typically use a 36 inch dropper leader attached to a trolling sinker. I use light line like 10 pound test on this leader in case I get snagged. That way, the bottom leader breaks and I still get my spreader and lure back.



Boat

Any boat that you can troll with will work. You will need to go slow, so you might have to use a trolling plate or pull buckets behind your boat to slow down enough.

At a minimum you will want to use a sonar unit that has a depth reading. The main use of the sonar unit is to read the current depth and warn of snags. You will occasionally mark fish but not always.

Locations

There are countless areas of the river system that are good for trolling. They stretch from Suisun Bay all the way up past Sacramento.

Popular Locations on the Sacramento River (listed upstream to downstream)

- Verona Marina downstream to the Interstate 5 bridge above the Elkhorn Boat Launch Facility.
- Interstate 80 crossing downstream to Miller Regional Park.
- Miller Regional Park downstream past the Sacramento Yacht Club.
- Garcia Bend area from the Minnow Hole (aka the Brick Yard near Riverside Blvd. and 43rd Ave.) downstream to the Freeport Bridge.
- Clarksburg Marina downstream to the Clarksburg boat launch.
- Walnut Grove downstream to Ko-ket Resort across from the town of Ryde.
- Isleton downstream to Vieira's Resort.
- Between the Real McCoy ferry (above the lower mouth Steamboat Slough) downstream to the Rio Vista bridge.

Popular Locations on the Mokelumne River

- Around the Walnut Grove Marina area.
- The Mokelumne River near Walnut Grove.
- The South Fork of the Mokelumne River up into Hog Slough.

Boat Launches (listed upstream to downstream)

- Verona Marina (6955 Garden Hwy, Nicolaus, CA 95659)
- Elkhorn Boat Launch Facility (5827 Garden Hwy, Sacramento, CA 95837)
- Discovery Park (1600 Garden Hwy, Sacramento, CA 95833)
- Broderick (151 Co Rd 136, West Sacramento, CA 95605)
- Miller Regional Park (2701 Marina View Dr, Sacramento, CA 95818)
- Stan's Yolo Marina (31070 S River Rd, Clarksburg, CA 95612)
- Garcia Bend Park (7654 Pocket Rd, Sacramento, CA 95831)
- Clarksburg (aka Merrit's Landing - 38125 S River Rd E9, Clarksburg, CA 95612)
- Wimpy's Marina (14001 W Walnut Grove Rd, Walnut Grove, CA 95690)
- New Hope Landing (13945 W Walnut Grove Rd, Walnut Grove, CA 95690)
- Ko-ket Resort (14174 Isleton Rd, Isleton, CA 95641)
- Vieira's Resort (15476 State Highway 160, Isleton CA 95641)
- Rio Vista Boat Launch (Unnamed Road, Rio Vista, CA 94571)
- Sandy Beach County Park (2333 Beach Dr, Rio Vista, CA 94571)
- Brannon Island State Recreation Area (17645 CA-160, Rio Vista, CA 94571)

Lures

Spinners

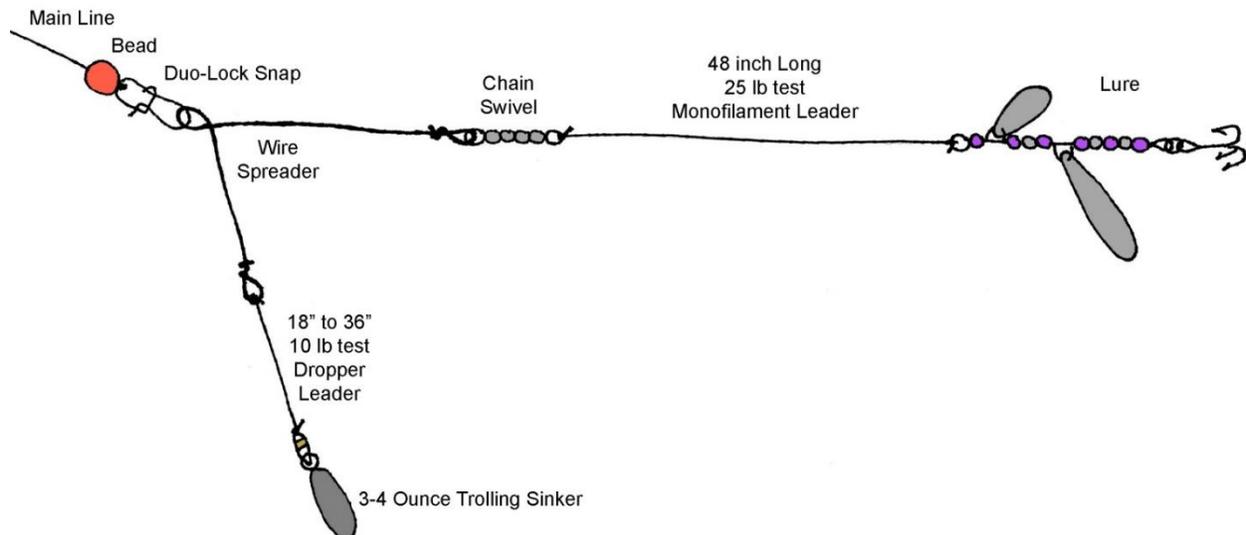
Spinners are simple and effective. I like the double-bladed Silvertron brand spinners the best. Troll spinners downstream at about 3.0 to 3.7 GPS speed depending on the flow and tidal movement. Use 4-ounce sinkers – you want the sinker to be bouncing the bottom every couple of seconds. If you see a snag on your sonar, speed up to about 4.5 mph to raise the lures above the obstacle. Be sure that your spreader has a swivel to the spinner leader to avoid line twists. I use the high-quality P-Line chain swivels.

Put some scented gel on the insides of the blades. For some extra scent, try putting some salt-cured anchovy strips on the rear hooks. Silvertron blades are made of real silver, so use Twinkle silver polish (True Value Hardware) to keep them up to shine when they get tarnished.



I like to use chartreuse in the morning and then switch to silver blades on some of the rods once the sun comes up. The best producers for me are the double-bladed chartreuse and the double-bladed silver with purple beads.

I make one modification to my spinners. I cut off the stock hook and rubber sheath with some wire cutters. Then I add a strong size 4 or 5 split ring and an Owner size 1 black chrome 2X strong cutting point stinger hook (model ST-41).



Cut Plugs

Brad's Super Bait Cut Plugs have gained popularity in recent years. They are usually run behind an 11 inch Pro-Troll ProChip rotating 360 degree flasher. The added flasher adds another level of complication to the setup. I would suggest getting familiar with your stretch of water using spinners first, and then switch to cut plugs if you want to try something new.



On the cut plug droppers, use 8-ounce sinkers on the side rods and 4-ounce sinkers on the back rods (if running 4 rods). From the chain swivel on the top side of the spreader, tie a 24-inch long 80-pound test mono leader to a Pro-Troll ProChip 11 Fin Flasher. From the flasher, run a 24-inch long 25-pound test fluorocarbon leader to your cut plug. I like to add a chain swivel to the rear of the flasher to prevent line twist.

The cut plug comes with a scent pad inside of the chamber. I will remove this and replace it with a similarly sized salted anchovy fillet. These seem to last longer than canned tuna. I switch them out every hour or so to keep the scent trail fresh. I also rub some scent onto the outside lure in addition to the bait inside of the lure.

I tie my leaders with Owner size 1 black chrome 2X strong cutting point stinger hook (model ST-41). Here are some recommendations from the Brad's website:



Wobbling Plugs

Wobbling plugs used to be the most popular trolling lures for salmon. Most locals are now using either cut plugs or spinners most of the time. However, there are some who believe that wobbling plugs work better when the water is cold or the fish are finicky.



The most popular wobbling plug brands are Kwikfish, Flatfish, and Brad's Killer Fish. I normally run the size K14 rattling Kwikfish, but sometimes I'll use K15's on a few rods.

Using magic thread, wrap a one inch long by ½ inch wide sardine or anchovy fillet centered to the bottom of the plug. This is called a sardine wrap, and you can watch a video [HERE](#).

Troll downstream at about 2.1 to 2.6 GPS speed. Because of current changes due to tides or dam releases, you have to play with the speed until you get the correct rhythm going. Use three ounce sinkers to keep your weight bouncing the bottom. Use a large duo-lock snap to attach your plug to the leader.

If you see a snag on your sonar, slow down and raise the rods to get the lures past the obstacle. Silver with a chartreuse head and tail is my go-to color.

I make several modifications to my plugs. For one, I add an extra split ring to each hook. The second split ring puts the hook farther back, plus it helps it to swivel when the fish shakes. In addition to the extra split rings, I change out the stock hooks with Owner black chrome 2X strong cutting point stinger hooks (model ST-41). Use size 1 on K14's and size 1/0 on K15's.

Lure Speed Review

- Spinners & Cut Plugs: About 3.0 MPH GPS speed incoming tide, 3.7 MPH GPS speed outgoing tide
- Wobbling Plugs: About 2.1 MPH GPS speed incoming tide, 2.6 MPH GPS speed outgoing tide

Technique

Direction

You will almost always want to troll downstream, or with the current in the delta where there are tides that flow both directions. You will cover more ground, and the in-your-face presentation seems to make the fish more aggressive. The only exception to this is when fish are holding in deep holes. It is sometimes possible to get these fish to strike by slowly trolling through them upstream.

Depth

The best depth for me over the years has been in the 16 to 19 foot range. I believe that for some reason salmon like to travel in this depth range. You will often mark salmon in deeper holes, but getting them to strike is difficult. I believe that the deeper fish are resting fish and are less likely to be in the mood to smack a lure.

Scents

Even when using sardine-wrapped plugs, I still like to add scent to my lures. With plugs, I'll smear the entire bottom side of the plug with gel. With spinners, I add gel to the backsides of the blades. Anise-Crawfish Smelly Jelly or Mike's Lunker Lotion green 'Salmon' gel are my usual offerings, but Pro-Cure bloody tuna is popular with other anglers.

Setbacks

I like to stagger the amount of line I let out when using multiple rods. If I'm fishing four rods, my setbacks will usually be left to right: 40', 70', 60', and 40'. It is very important that you get the lure into the correct depth so that you stay in the strike zone. If your sinker isn't bouncing the bottom every few seconds, let out more line.

The Salmon Strike

Sometimes the rod loads up like you hooked a big waterlogged sponge. Other times the fish will erratically peel out line. The rod will pump when you hook a fish. With a snag, the line will steadily peel out. Set your drag tight, but not so tight that your rod breaks if you hook a snag. Turn on your clicker so you can hear when you have a fish or a snag.

Fish On

Immediately take the rod out of the holder – there is no need for a hook set. The most important thing while fighting a salmon is to not give them any loose line or slack.

Steadily pump the rod up to gain ground, and slowly reel down to pick up the line. Don't shake or whip the rod while reeling down – keep it nice and steady like clockwork. I like to loosen my drag after hooking a fish, in case they make a strong run.

Move around the boat and follow the fish if it runs under the boat or motor. Net the fish head first, and trap the fish against the side of the boat once it is netted.

I normally keep trolling until the angler has the rod in hand and is in control of the fish. At that point, I will slow the boat down and possibly reel in other rods if there is a possibility tangles.

If you decide to keep the fish, knock it out with a club. Bleed the fish by ripping out the gills with pliers and dunk it in the water on a stringer for about five minutes (watch for sea lions first!) This will remove unwanted blood from the meat and roe. Now put it on ice for the remainder of the trip. 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 after 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.

Bite Window

Fish seem to move at first light and right before sunset. Moving fish seem to be more likely to grab lures in my experience. The other times to target are tide changes. The hour before and after a tide change seems to be a good time to have your line in the water.

Times that salmon will bite are very unpredictable. They tend to bite during stretches that last about 20 minutes. Salmon will strike like crazy for about 20 minutes, and then without warning they will shut off. You need to take advantage of the times when they are biting! If you see nets flying, be ready to spring into action!

In the lower section of the delta (below Walnut Grove), folks seem to do better trolling with the incoming tide. High tide and the beginning of the outgoing tide is usually the best time to fish during normal flows. If the water releases are high, the low tide and the beginning of the incoming tide is good since it fights the fast current. Certain locations seem to fish better on certain tides. You just have to develop your own preferences.

Tips

- Try varying your speed if you don't get any strikes.
- Sea lions indicate the presence of fish, but be weary of sea lions when fighting or bleeding your fish. They will try to steal your fish (no joke).
- Don't cut off other anglers, pull in front of other trollers, or run up into the back of anybody trolling. Be courteous out there.
- Use scents to mask your human odors. 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!
- If you hook a salmon run back upstream about ½ mile and go back through the same area. If there is a pod of fish moving though this is your chance to fill out your limits