

# Trolling for Salmon on the California Delta and Sacramento Area

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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 .....	4
Some Popular Locations .....	5
Lures .....	5
Spinners.....	5
Plugs .....	6
Technique.....	7
Direction.....	7
Depth.....	7
Scents .....	7
Setbacks.....	7
The Salmon Strike.....	7
Fish On .....	7
Bite Window .....	8
Tips.....	9

## 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" rods.

### Reel

Any midsized casting reel will work just fine. I like to use Abu-Garcia Ambassadeur model 6500 reels.

If you use rod holder, you will want to use a reel with a clicker for that you can hear the line peel out when a fish is hooked.



### Main Line

20 pound test monofilament is a good choice. The nice thing about monofilament line is that it stretches. This will help to absorb the violent head shakes that salmon produce. I also use Power Pro 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.



### Net

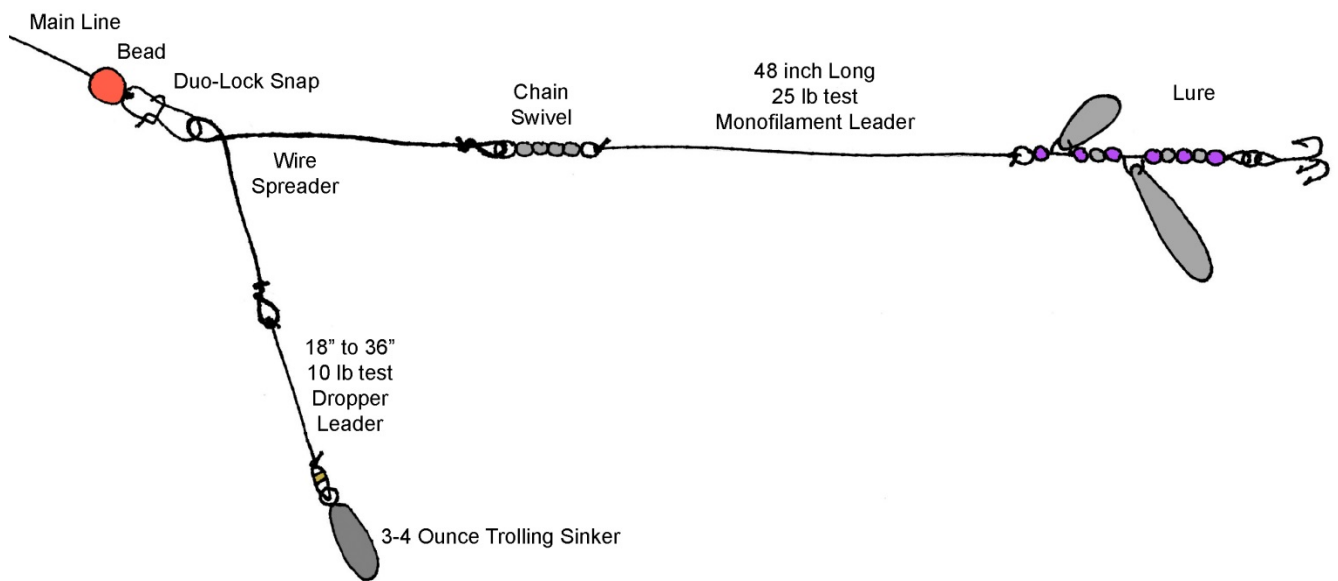
Use the biggest net you can find within regulation. I like a long handle for reaching out for fish going crazy at the boat.

## 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 at the bottom.

On the top leg of the spreader I tie a 48 inch long monofilament 25 pound test P-line moss green leader to my lure.

On the bottom leg of the spreader I typically use an 18 to 36 inch dropper leader tied to a trolling sinker. I use a 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.

At a minimum you will want to use a sonar unit that has a reasonable depth reading. Although salmon are hard to detect in the ocean, they are easy to see in the river. Keep in mind that it is much easier to mark fish going downstream than it is going against the current.

## Locations

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

## Some Popular Locations

- The Rio Vista area of the Sacramento River
- In front of Viera's Resort on the Sacramento River up past Isleton
- The Walnut Grove area on the Sacramento River between Walnut Grove and Ko-ke
- The stretch of the Sacramento River between Clarksburg and Discovery Park
- The South Fork of the Mokelumne River near Walnut Grove
- The Sacramento River between Verona and Elkhorn

## Lures

### Spinners

I like the double-bladed Silvertrons spinners the best. Spinners are easier to troll than plugs because getting the right speed for a plug can be tricky. Troll spinners downstream at about 3.0 to 3.7 GPS speed depending on the flow and tidal movement. Use four ounce sinkers – you want that sinker to be bouncing the bottom. 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 to avoid line twists. I use the high-quality P-Line chain swivels.

Try using chartreuse or gold during low light or overcast conditions. Put some scent gel on the insides of the blades. Silvertron blades are made of real silver, so use Twinkle silver polish (True Value) 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, to which I attach a Gamakatsu size 1 black chrome 2X strong hook. I feel that the stronger hooks help me get the fish in faster, plus the swiveling action of the hook may help with head shakes.

You can find Silvertron lures in most bait or tackle stores in the Sacramento area, or order them online from [Fisherman's Warehouse](#). For a full rundown on Silvertron spinners visit their website at [silvertron.com](http://silvertron.com)



## Plugs

The most popular plugs for trolling 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 head shakes. In addition to the extra split rings, I change out the stock hooks with Gamakatsu black chrome 2X strong hooks. Use size 1 on K14's and size 1/0 on K15's.

## Speed Guide

- Spinners: 3.1 MPH GPS speed incoming tide, 3.5 MPH GPS speed outgoing tide
- Plugs: 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). 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 plugs 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. Sardine, Herring, or Mike's Lunger Lotion green 'Salmon' gel are my usual offerings.

### **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 50'. 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, 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 and give it several strong hook sets. The most important thing while fighting a salmon is to not give them any loose line or slack. Slowly raise 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 put the motor in neutral and fight the fish. If you do this, have your deck hands reel in the other rods. Otherwise, it's best to keep slowly trolling along.

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.

In the lower section of the delta (below Walnut Grove), folks seem to do better trolling with the incoming tide. Above Walnut Grove, the outgoing tides seem to make fish more active and prone to striking. 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.

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!



## 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