

**July 26, 2008**  
Idaho Outdoors

## Good salmon news is worth celebrating

But all of Idaho's wild runs are still endangered, and fishing seasons each year are by no means guaranteed.

By Roger Phillips

It was an up-and-down salmon fishing season, but any salmon fishing in Idaho is cause for celebration. Now there's more good news about our salmon and steelhead runs.

While this year's chinook runs didn't live up to initial predictions, and high spring runoff hampered early fishing efforts, anglers still caught almost 15,000 chinook and the upper Salmon River got its first season in 30 years.

Now we have the biggest sockeye run in decades. Almost 800 fish are expected to return to Idaho, and it appears there's a good run of steelhead on their tails.

Steelhead counts at Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River are running about one-third higher than the 10-year average.

As far as I am concerned, that is a lot of good news about salmon and steelhead runs, and it should be acknowledged.

A tip of the fishing cap goes to all the state and federal fisheries biologists, conservationists and Indian tribes who helped make it happen.

A big humble bow goes to Mother Nature for providing fish that are so hardy and tenacious they can withstand all the natural and man-made obstacles in their way as they swim from Idaho to the Pacific and back again.

Kudos should also go to everyone from judges and lawyers to power companies, ranchers and loggers who made choices and sacrifices, whether willingly or grudgingly, to ensure that salmon return to Idaho's rivers.

Those efforts have helped Idahoans have a salmon fishing season every year since 2000. Based on counts of juvenile "jack" salmon, which serve as an indicator of next year's run, chances are good we will have more salmon fishing next year, and possibly a big return.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game reported this year's jack count was 15,726, which is better than 2000, when 13,711 jacks returned. After that year, 184,000 adult chinook returned, which was the highest return since 1975, when fish counting started at Lower Granite Dam.

Assuming we have a chinook season next year, that will make 10 consecutive years of salmon fishing, the longest unbroken streak dating back to the 1950s, according to F&G records.

We've also come to expect annual steelhead runs that are nearly triple what they were a few decades ago and enough hatchery fish to provide steelhead fishing from July through May between Lewiston and Stanley.

But that good news is also shadowed by the bad. All four of Idaho's wild, anadromous (ocean-going) salmon and steelhead remain on the endangered species list. Idaho's anadromous coho are extinct, although the Nez Perce tribe is trying to restore a hatchery run.

It is both disturbing and confusing how once-abundant runs of native salmon and steelhead have been segregated into strange categories like hatchery fish, naturally spawned (which could be wild or unmarked hatchery fish), and wild, native stocks.

There's also a constant struggle among states, Indian tribes, commercial and sport anglers over how to divide the harvest of returning fish.

And finally, we should all be embarrassed that despite billions of dollars devoted to recovering salmon, we still wonder from year to year if there will be enough for even a modest fishing season.

rphillips@idahostatesman.com