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SACRAMENTO RIVER SALMON
POPULATIONS HAVE COLLAPSED,
BUT WAY UP NORTH THE TRINITY
IS A GREAT PLACE TO ...

Fish on!



D1



HOLLY A. HEYSER

Guide Jon Harrison rows and Hank Shaw anticipates the next action in the Trinity River during a salmon trip last month. Also aboard is Harrison's dog, also named Trinity.

By HOLLY A. HEYSER
Special to *The Bee*

Our guide uttered the magic words on the drive home from a lackluster striped-bass fishing trip on the Sacramento River:

For my boyfriend, Hank Shaw – who is obsessed with cooking – the abracadabra moment came with a description of the fish: “They’re so fat it’s like they come with their own butter.”

I was hypnotized by a description of the river: “The water is so clear you can see 20 feet down. Sometimes you can see the fish coming in to take your bait. And some days you don’t see anyone else on the water.”

“We’re in,” we told Jon Harrison of Five Rivers Guide Service in Orangevale. We were going salmon fishing on the Trinity River.

Salmon fishing was becoming a distant memory for us with the unexpected collapse of the Sacramento River Chinook salmon run in fall 2007. The fish count inexplicably plunged to barely half of what was needed for a sustainable population. State and federal agencies responded by drastically curtailing salmon fishing in 2008, and again this year.

But salmon runs on the Klamath River and its tributary, the Trinity, are in better shape, so riches await anyone willing to make the 3½-hour trip north. And for Harrison, nothing compares to the Trinity.

“It’s my favorite of the rivers I fish,” he said, naming waterways: Sacramento, American, Feather, Yuba and Trinity.

“You can get away from people. It reminds me of my childhood fishing in the Sierras, but the fish are much larger.”

When we fished the Trinity with Harrison a few weeks ago, we targeted the spring run, the first of two Chinook runs on the river.

The fall salmon run, which is projected to be quite robust this year, is what brings anglers out in droves in September and October.

But the spring run is unusual: Instead of heading upriver and spawning fairly quickly as the fall fish do, spring-run Chinook sprint up the Trinity as early as April and spend the summer loitering in deep holes until they reach

sexual maturity. Then they move into spawning beds.

(The spring run begins in mid-June, when water flows drop to manageable levels, and continues through August.

Fishers can catch and keep two salmon a day, starting in January. Possession is also limited to no more than two.)

Because salmon don’t feed after they enter fresh water, these fish must pack on the fat before leaving the ocean for the last act of their lives. That’s what Harrison meant when he said they come with their own butter: They’re as good as, or better than, ocean-caught salmon.

That was appealing to me because I’d caught one salmon in my life – a 32-pound non-ster, just south of downtown Sacramento – and rather than

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HOLLY A. HEYSER

It’s hard to tell who’s more excited about a 29-inch salmon hauled in by Holly Heyser – guide Jon Harrison or his dog Trinity.

salmon: Barbless hooks help thrown-back and escaped fish stay alive

Salmon: Barbless hooks help thrown-back and escaped fish stay alive

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being delighted with the feast I'd caught, I was put off. It tasted like the Sacramento River from which it had come.

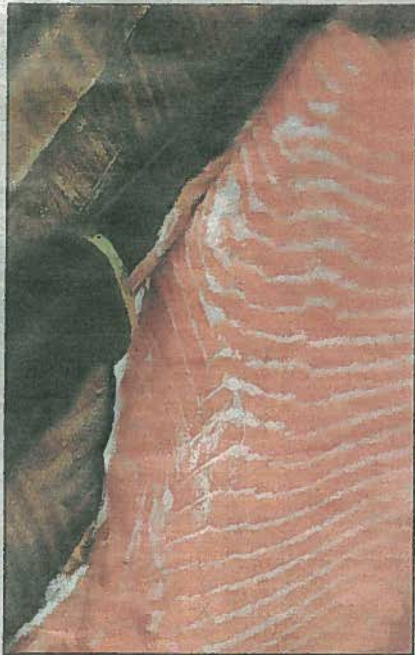
Now we were just waiting for proof that the Trinity springers were everything Harrison said.

On the first morning of our two-day trip, we set out on the river at 5:30 a.m.

"You can't write where we are," Harrison said sternly, looking me in the eye.

We soon found out why: This stretch of the upper Trinity River was virtually deserted, even though there were plenty of anglers in the area. We knew from the empty trailer where we had parked that there was one boat in the water ahead of us, but in more than seven hours on the river that day, we saw just one other angler - a man fishing from the bank.

Soon after putting in, Harrison rowed us in his drift boat just a short way downstream before stopping just above a pool that was dotted with rocks covered by lush bunch grasses and Indian rhubarb. He spent a few minutes tying sardine filets onto Quikfish lures, trussing them up with fishing line. Because salmon don't eat in fresh water, the idea wasn't to tantalize their taste buds but to irritate



The spring-run chinook salmon is renowned for its high fat content.

HOLLY A HEYSER

them, prompting an attack. Harrison dropped the first Quikfish into the water and let line out until the lure hit the spot where he knew the fish lay. Thunk! Thunk! A fish was on the line immediately. He handed the rod to Hank, who started reeling, and then, just as quickly the fish was free.

What had happened? Our barbless hooks, required on the Trinity and throughout the Klamath basin, would make it a challenge to land fish on this trip.

The hooks prevent killing the fish that anglers don't or can't keep, says Larry Hanson, a senior biologist for the state Department of Fish and Game.

When Harrison dropped

hook. But Hank brought it back, and after several attempts with the net, we finally got it on the boat. Thirty inches long, about 20 pounds - well worth the wait.

This was the only fish we would get that day, but the next day I caught my limit of two by 8 a.m., the first 25 inches long, the second 29 inches. It was a respectable haul for a season in which the spring run has been described as average.

So how do Trinity springers taste? Harrison hadn't exaggerated a bit. They were rich and decadent, as good as the best salmon we've ever had. We feasted for days and froze what we knew we couldn't eat soon.

Even if the salmon run on the Sacramento River rebounds and provides good salmon fishing much closer to home, I suspect we'll head back to the Trinity with Harrison every summer. We've fallen under the river's spell.

Holly A. Heyser teaches journalism at California State University, Sacramento, and writes a blog about hunting. Read more about this fishing trip - including tales of what Heyser and Shaw did with their catch - on Heyser's blog, www.norcalczasador.com, and Shaw's blog, www.honest-food.net.

our lures back into the water, we hooked two more fish immediately, a fourth a little later, but we lost all of them. At the next pool we fished, we hooked and lost one more.

Harrison was flabbergasted at the bad luck, and so was Hanson when I told him about it later. "The hook-to-loss rate shouldn't be as high as you experienced," Hanson said.

Despite the lost fish, we were buoyed by having hooked so many. We knew they were there - and biting. Harrison kept moving us down the river, and for the most part it was a soothing ride. We glided through clear waters, watched red alders drooping their first leaves in the light breeze, and spotted

SALMON FISHING ON THE TRINITY RIVER

Spring run: Mid-June through August. (You can catch and keep two fish per day. You can also have only two in your possession. The limits apply starting in January, though most spring-run fishing begins mid-June.)

Fall run: September and October (limit three per day, no more than two adult fish; possession limit 0 nine, no more than six adults)

Guides include:

- Jon Harrison of Five Rivers Guide Service, (916) 806-3119.
- You'll other Trinity River fishing guides at www.blm.gov/ca/s/en/fo/redding/recreationmain/fishguide.html.

Other salmon fishing in California:

- **Ocean:** Aug. 29-Sept. 7, north of Horse Mountain in Humboldt County, limit of two fish per day, minimum size 24 inches
- **Sacramento River:** Nov. 16-Dec. 31, from Highway 113 in Knights Landing to the lower Red Bluff (Sycamore) boat ramp, limit of one fish - per day and in possession.

Other things to do in Trinity County

- Visit the Trinity County Chamber of Commerce at www.trinitycounty.com, or (800) 487-4648.

So, apparently the salmon fishing is great on the Trinity River in spite of it being one of the most heavily gold dredged rivers in Northern California. So, why has suction dredging been banned in the entire state under the guise of protecting salmon when, in fact, salmon runs don't exist on many rivers draining the Sierra Nevada Range and in fact on rivers where salmon runs are still healthy, the salmon seem to co-exist just fine alongside the gold dredging community. Something smells very fishy with this state-wide ban on suction dredging. Incidentally, this article on the great salmon fishing on the Trinity River was published exactly one week after the suction dredge ban was signed into law. The whole thing stinks.