

## King Salmon Fishing 101

Salmon fishing hasn't come very easily most days this year. But, I know some captains are really struggling when I've been placing mid-pack without weighing a limit and they are commenting on how I'm a good fisherman. I love the speakers at our club meetings, but frequently they speak about specific techniques and some of our less experienced captains may not even know the questions they should be asking. With these thoughts in mind, I figured that I would share some of the things I think I know about salmon fishing with those who may benefit from my insights.

**Fishing Location:** We generally fish a different port at every salmon tournament, so how are you supposed to figure out where the fish are the 2-3 days that you're in town? As every magazine will tell you, start by asking. Bait shops, fellow club members, and other people in the harbor and at the launch are all potential sources of information. But knowing the fish were caught generally in a certain direction isn't enough. What depth of water? Near any particular shore feature? Don't be shy – you want to catch fish, don't you?

Here's the "secret" to help dial in from there. Pretty much all Lake Michigan ports from Ludington to the north feature a prominent series of underwater flats separated by steep drop offs. Use whatever information you've gathered, and then setup to run along the top edge or bottom edge of the closest drop-off. If boat traffic allows, cut up and down the drop off until you find a consistent depth. Heavy boat traffic will push out fish, as will bright sunny days. If nothing is working on the shallow side, try the next drop off deeper.

**How Deep to Run Your Lures:** Always check your fish finder, but even if you're not marking fish, the water temperature will give you a clue. First thing in the morning, you're looking for water temperatures in the 48-54 degree range. Feel free to set baits in colder and warmer water, but if I'm going to make a bet, it's on the 54 degree water first thing in the morning. The salmon generally will move as cold as 42 degrees (or more) as the sun rises, but I would still keep some things near the 54 degree band. Also remember that the fish will generally swim up to a lure above them, but not down to something below them (the eyes are on the top of the head!), so err on the side of shallow.

There are multiple ways to obtain water temperature at depth. Many of the more experienced captains make use of various trolling probes such as Subtroll, Fish Hawk, and other models. These probes can be invaluable for dialing in to the fish. However, if you're not willing to spend the money or don't want a probe for some reason, there are other options: (1) call somebody with a probe and ask what depth the water temperature is at; (2) Google UGLOS buoys and find the weather buoy listings – the buoys have a string of thermocouples which read the water temperature at various depths; (3) Pay attention to how warm or cold your cannonballs are when you pull them up. A cannonball running in the right water temperature usually feels cold to the touch and will even have some condensation on it while it sits in the air.

There are a couple of things that trump the open water temperature game – bait in warmer water (fish need to eat) and kings headed up the rivers in the fall. Keep your eyes open for both situations.

**How Fast to Troll:** There are so many variables here and each set of lures are different, so I can't give you a magic number. That said, my Subtroll is almost always between 1.8 and 2.4 mph when I'm catching fish. I've seen other boats run up to 2.8 mph at the probe. Do you notice a pattern here? Get a probe! Underwater currents can make the speed your lures are moving at completely different than your GPS speed. You need to know what your lures are moving at so that you can repeat patterns when you catch a fish. Again, some hacks if you don't have a probe: (1) Get at least one dipsy diver dialed in and catching fish. If your drag is set right, the diver rod will be bent over and the drag will just barely keep the line from pulling out. If your underwater speed becomes too fast, the line will start to pull out. If the underwater speed becomes too slow, the rod won't bend over as far; (2) use your cannonballs the same way – you can see the angle the rigger wire is going out at when you have the balls at depth; (3) run a dodger on a rigger – at the slow end, you'll see the rod tip pulse as the dodger swings back and forth – great for lake trout and works for salmon. Speed up a bit, and you're more into salmon territory. Bottom line, be observant and you'll know when you're too fast or too slow.

A final note on speed – Pay all the attention you want to it, but sometimes the fish want something different than what you dial in to. If traffic allows, turn the boat in lazy curves headed on average in the direction you want to go. This will speed up your outside lines and slow down your inside lines, giving you clues about what to do based on which lines the fish hit. This also changes your direction of troll, which should give you a better idea about which directions the fish expect to see your baits moving in for a better presentation.

**My Basic Spread:** I usually start with two downriggers, four dipsy divers, and two copper setups at lengths that are expected to get to the desired water temperature. Do whatever works best for your boat to get lines in in the water quickly and to minimize tangles. Save the playing around and learning new equipment and bait setups for when the fishing is slow and the sun is up.

#### **Final Miscellaneous Thoughts:**

- Get it moving in the morning. When you're putting out lines, focus on getting the fastest lines to set in the water first. Sure, a 300 copper might catch fish, but if you're tied up holding a rod to get that line out, the other rods which could have been in the water much faster have no chance of catching a fish. Also be ready to set lines – the best way to waste time is to have put no thought into your spread before you get to your fishing spot. Know what you're going to put on every rod before you get there.
- Take a broad view on colors, patterns, and finishes. Play with gloss vs. glow, dark vs. light, and red end of the rainbow vs. purple end of the rainbow. Don't get tied up in the details. If you're going to make some guesses, remember that blue / purple / UV light penetrates the deepest in the water column and red / orange stops fairly quickly (i.e. run the redder stuff shallower and the bluer stuff deeper). Think about glow when the sky is dark, and UV when the sky is light. There's an exception to every rule here, so don't be afraid to experiment. I frequently catch fish on a green/chartreuse spoon without any glow during the pre-dawn bite. Keep working the back of the boat until you dial a pattern in.

**Some Additional Resources:**

I've learned what I know over years of fishing. I started out by fishing on other people's boats and bought my own after a couple of years of being taught by people who already knew how to catch the fish. Even if you have your own boat, try to get on somebody else's at least once a year. Not only is it fun, it's also educational.

If you like to read, I strongly suggest Dan Keating's books. If I remember correctly, the titles of the books are "Great Lakes Salmon and Trout Fishing" and the more salmon specific book "Keating on Kings". Dan covers some of the things above in much greater detail and has some terrific insights to share on fishing and setting up your boat.

Finally, if you're a visual learner, Bill Bale and Dave Engel of Best Chance Charters have a DVD. It has some useful knowledge and is entertaining to watch.