

Traditional Upper Kuskokwim Salmon Fishing Areas

Takotna/Nixon

This fishery includes the Takotna River, the Nixon Fork and other tributaries such as Tatalina Creek and Big Creek. Members of the Vinsale and Tatlawiksuk groups harvested salmon in this region. Currently, the productivity of this area has declined and residents often fish along the Main River instead. The water runs fairly clear along this system.

Main River

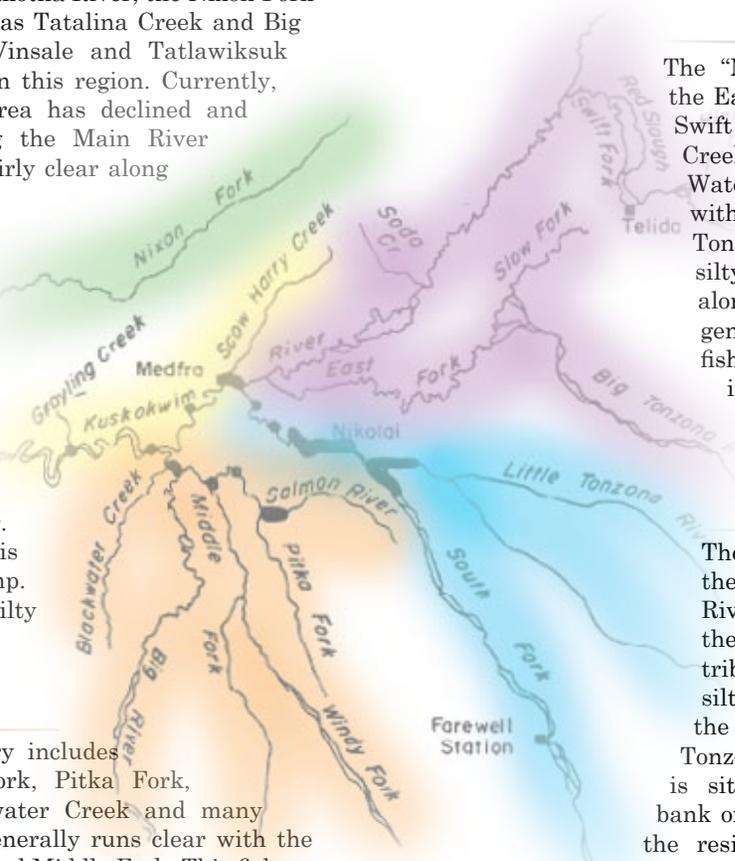
The Main River refers to the Kuskokwim between Deacon's Landing upstream to the confluence of the North and South Forks. McGrath is on the Kuskokwim directly across from the mouth of the Takotna River. Another important site is Medfra, a seasonal fish camp. The Main River runs very silty and turbid.

Salmon River

The "Salmon River" fishery includes the Big River, Middle Fork, Pitka Fork, the Salmon River, Blackwater Creek and many other tributaries. Water generally runs clear with the exception of the Big River and Middle Fork. This fishery is mostly used by Nikolai residents.

Credits

- Steven Nikolai Sr., Telida Village.
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 1994, "Alaska Wildlife Notebook Series", Juneau, Alaska.
- Elizabeth Andrews and Micheal Coffing (1986), "Kuskokwim River Subsistence Chinook Fisheries", Technical Paper 86, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Subsistence, Juneau, Alaska.
- Jeff Stokes (1985), "Natural Resource Utilization of Four Upper Kuskokwim Communities", Technical Paper 85, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, Juneau, Alaska.
- Alan Dick, Alaska Native Knowledge Network Clipart.
- Elizabeth Andrews, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Cartography Supervisor.
- Chinook Salmon. Coho Salmon. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/da/environ/nyfish/Salmonidae/>
- Native clipart from the Alaska Native Knowledge Network. www.ankn.uaf.edu.
- Chum Salmon. Detlef Buettner. <http://home.gci.net/~lifesize.fish/salmonids.htm>



North Fork

The "North Fork" includes the East Fork/Big Tonzona, Swift Fork, Highpower Creek and Slow Fork. Water turbidity varies, with the East Fork/Big Tonzona being the most silty. Telida is situated along the Swift Fork, and generally are the major fishers of silver salmon in this fishery.

South Fork

The "South Fork" includes the main Kuskokwim River upstream of the Big River. Major tributaries include the silt laden South Fork and the generally clear Little Tonzona River. Nikolai is situated on the north bank of the South Fork, and the residents fish this fork presently for all three species of salmon.



SALMON

Staple of the Athabascan



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Environmental
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Species of Pacific Salmon

King Salmon

Other Names: Gas, Chinook, blackmouth, quinnat



Range: Chukchi Sea in Alaska to Monterey Bay in California. Also present from Siberia to Japan. Also populates the Yukon, Kuskokwim, Kenai, Copper and Susitna, to name a few rivers.

General Description: Adults have black irregular spotting on the back and dorsal fins. Black pigment also runs along the gumline. Bluish-green coloring on the top fades to silver on the sides and white on the bottom. Spawning salmon colors range from red to copper to almost black.

Life History: King Salmon start life in fresh water rivers, move to the sea and then journey to spawn again in fresh water. The salmon may mature anywhere from their first to seventh year; size among the fish varies greatly according to maturity. Salmon migrations can be extensive. Those bound for the Yukon travel as much as 2000 river miles during a 60 day period.

Fishing Details: The King Salmon is the Alaska state fish and one of the most important sport and commercial fish native to the Pacific coast of North America. It is the largest of all Pacific salmon, with weights commonly exceeding 30 pounds.

Silver Salmon

Other Names: Coho, "Reds", Nosdlaghe



Range: Coastal waters of Alaska from Southeast to Point Hope on the Chukchi Sea and the Yukon River.

General Description: Adults are bright silver with small black spots on the back, distinguished from King Salmon by the lack of black spots on the lower lobe of the tail and gray gums. Males develop a prominent hooked snout with large teeth called a kype. Spawning adults have dark

backs and heads with maroon to reddish sides.

Life History: Like Kings, Silver salmon spawn in fresh water, mature in salt water and then return to the rivers from July to November to spawn once mature. Maturity can take from six months at sea to 18 months.

Fishing Details: Historically, silver salmon harvest has always been secondary to king salmon harvest, the kings arriving first and in larger quantity. Silvers are spectacular fighters on a line, the most acrobatic of the Pacific salmon.

Chum Salmon

Other Names: Dog, Nolaya, srughot'aye, calico



Range: Chum range the widest of any salmon species, from the Sacramento river in California to the island of Kyushu in the Sea of Japan

General Description: In the sea, chum are difficult to distinguish from coho or sockeye salmon without examining their gills or fin scale patterns. Their gillrakes are fewer, but larger. However, once they reach fresh water, they develop vertical bars of green and purple, more pronounced in the males.

Life History: Chum salmon spawning is typical of Pacific salmon. They spawn in small side channels of rivers, with the salmon fry staying in the fresh water longer than other species of salmon. Most chum salmon mature at 4 years of age. Chum are also concentrated in the northern areas of Alaska

Fishing: Chum are most often caught through dip or gill netting, and accidental harvest when fishing for other species of salmon. The number of chum have declined in recent years, some say due to overfishing. Chum are often dried and smoked.

Harvesting Salmon

Fish Weirs/Traps/Fences

Traditional fish fences were stream or river blocking devices for harvesting large numbers of salmon in short periods of time, targeting King Salmon. Fish fences are very efficient at trapping the salmon, working best in shallow, clear upriver tributaries of the Kuskokwim, notably the Salmon River and the Little Tonzona River. They were often made of spruce wood, and featured a fence across the stream leading to a long funnel that caught the fish. Fish fences played a vital part in the subsistence harvest of salmon in the past. Fish fences are now illegal to use in the State of Alaska due to game control laws.

Fish Wheels

Fishwheels were first introduced to the Upper Kuskokwim in 1914. Fishwheels quickly came into use by subsistence fishers, who were able to harvest necessary quantities of salmon closer to winter settlements in less time. Fishwheels also spurred the development of marketing the caught salmon because of the volume the fishwheels were able to harvest.

A fishwheel consists of a raft built around several large baskets that rotate on an axle in the middle of the raft. The current of the river causes the baskets to rotate and sweep fish swimming upstream out of the river into a holding bin. Fishwheels are no longer in use on the Upper Kuskokwim due to State regulations.

Rod and Reel

With the regulatory elimination of traditional fish fences, using a rod and reel is now the major harvest method for salmon on the Upper Kuskokwim. Subsistence fishers fish at traditional salmon "milling" sites, hooking salmon by the mouth or snagging them. After being hooked, a salmon is captured in a landing net or shot through the head.

Seasons

June

July

August

September

Salmon Running

King Salmon

Chum Salmon

Silver Salmon

Whitefish

