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Bill Monroe's column: Spring Chinook run in Tillamook not large, but still worthwhile

by Bill Monroe, Special to The Oregonian
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Bill Monroe/Special to The Oregonian

Spring chinook fishing in Tillamook Bay. Jay Nicholas, a salmon researcher retired from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, landed a bright spring chinook on a fly rod in the upper Monday, June 8, 2009.

TILLAMOOK -- They furrow the surface like fullbacks hitting the line, tossing beanpole tacklers aside in their wake.

Or dive to the bottom and wallow; or circle the boat dizzily then lunge unexpectedly at net's edge for another tearing run. Ten ... 20 ... 30 yards of line peel through the guides before you regain what little control you thought you had.

"When I tell you, lean back and pull as hard as you can," said John Krauthoefer, a guide who has matched anglers with spring chinook for four decades. "It will be awhile, though."

Awhile? By the time Krauthoefer slipped the net under this one, the incoming tide carried us from the tip of the north jetty almost to the turn near Barview.

There's nothing small about a Tillamook spring chinook. Witness the two 20-pounders landed Monday by me and fellow outdoor communicator Grant McOmie of KGW (8) -- his glistening chrome, crappielike female dripping with sea lice and my somewhat darker, angrier male.

(Full disclosure: McOmie landed his in the upper bay on a chartreuse spinner; Krauthoefer then pulled his boat at Memaloose to catch the incoming tide on the bar, where the day's second fish again struck McOmie's rod as we trolled cut-plug herring. Like the gentleman he is, McOmie handed it to me. I rarely take handoffs, as most guides I've been with will attest. I'm rarely offered a spring chinook handoff, though, and never, ever turn them down unless a newcomer or a youngster is nearby ... and even then only after much suffering.)

Most of the spring chinook in the run here enter the Trask River. The run never is very large: Perhaps 1,500 to 2,000 hatchery adults return from releases of 285,000. But there are enough to make the trip worthwhile, and Krauthoefer said this year there seem to be more than usual.

"We just can't get them to bite," he said.

Indeed, salmon rolled tantalizingly throughout the upper tidewater zones in the morning as we pulled spinners across their paths starting at dawn, until McOmie caught one about 7:30.

Springers in tidewater aren't necessarily close to the bottom, Krauthoefer said, but rather suspend themselves a few feet up in deeper holes.



Tillamook spring chinook, like this matched pair of a bright female and darker male, are typically larger than their Columbia River system cousins.

Sometimes they meander. McOmie's bright hen probably shot in from sea and rode the incoming tide directly upriver. Mine, on the other hand, was dark enough it might have been in and out of the bay entrance several times.

Spinners are the rule in the upper bay, with a mix of spinners and herring out in the middle, Krauthoefer said.

(Note to you fall chinook spinner anglers: The Wilson River has again shifted channels, and most of the combined Wilson/Trask channel at the Sheep Corral has filled in. Guides have erected warning posts along the shoals, but pick your paths carefully. The bay's west channel remains the same.)

We spotted someone fighting a fish and trolled that way to watch the fun, then stared incredulously as Jay Nicholas, lead author of the Oregon Salmon Plan, retired from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and now a researcher for the Wild Salmon Center in Portland, worked his prize on a fly rod. It wasn't the first springer I've heard of caught on a fly rod, of course, but it was the first in many, many years, and we got to watch it.

Nicholas, cautious as a guide asked about his secret bait cure, said he "couldn't remember" whether he had been casting (he was casting furiously half an hour later) and called the fly a "wooly worm," but it sure didn't look like any wooly worm I've ever used on trout.

Out on the bar after noon, Krauthoefer cut-plugged some large (blue-sized) herring, beefed up the weights to six ounces (maybe eight), and we started trolling with the incoming current from the end of the north jetty. (Another cautionary note: Just inside the sunken end of the jetty, at the site where a crab boat swamped over the winter, is a pile of debris on the bottom that will eat up

whatever rig it grabs. It's probably a heap of crab pots. Start at the visible rocks and you'll be OK.)

Here, he trolls with his bait within a few feet of the bottom. Let the weight drop until it stops, then reel up three or four cranks; adjust every once in a while as the tide carries you into shallower water.

McOmie's rod (my fish) dipped almost immediately. Then there was an hour's lull before another fish struck Krauthoefer's bait -- and let it go.

The best fishing on the bar might be this week, with an excellent tidal series -- soft ebbs in the morning (troll and hold into the current) and stronger floods in the afternoon.

They lead to Saturday's eagerly awaited offshore coho season, which Krauthoefer said he will work through the summer into fall rather than join other Oregon guides in Alaska.

Even with the Nehalem system closed to chinook this season and fall chinook limited on Tillamook Bay, he said, "It's going to be a crazy summer; like the old days."

Meanwhile, if the ocean kicks up and you can't cross the bar, give Tillamook spring chinook a shot.

The run should bring fireworks to the bay through the Fourth of July.

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