

Catch of the Day: Poachers

Article by: Captain Rex Leath

He grabbed his king pole, his boots and some bug dope, jumped in his truck and headed out. It was late June, the 27th to be exact, about 1am, and this was the time for catching kings at the Eklutna tailrace. The Chinook run on the Knik River is not the largest, nor are they the biggest fish in the state, but for someone that does not have the time or maybe the resources to drive to the Kenai or Copper River, the Knik River gives a person a slim chance to catch a King salmon.



A fisherman examines a Chinook salmon on the bank of the Knik River.

When he pulled up to the parking lot several cars were already there. He worked his way down the well-worn foot path and nestled into a spot on the river. It didn't take long before he saw the first king pulled in. It was yarded up on the bank with a hook in its side and destined for a dinner table. Over the next couple of hours the kings kept getting landed. With a flick or the wrist, dip of the pole, and slight twitch of the rod tip, they were hooked, some in the tail, some in the side. A few were hooked in the mouth, but not many.

With all the kings getting hauled on the river bank, the man hadn't reeled one in. A typical fisherman would be disappointed but the man was not a typical fisherman. The difference was that out of sight and under his non-descriptive coat he had a unique tool that wasn't meant for catching kings. It was meant to preserve their population. That tool was the uniform of an Alaska Wildlife Trooper.

Alaska Wildlife Troopers received many calls about people illegally snagging king salmon at this location. Troopers had patrolled in obvious uniform just days prior and educated anglers on the legal methods and means of fishing for the area. That patrol didn't seem to have much effect since people continued to call and complain about the numerous illegal catches and retention of the kings. With the limited amount of troopers covering the region, enforcement efforts had to change if a difference was going to be made. Since education and warnings were not working there were few options left. The undercover Trooper had seen enough to know it was time to change the tone on the river bank.

Moments later an Alaska State Trooper pulled into the parking lot in uniform and in a marked patrol car. The fishermen started to pass the word that troopers arrived. People began shuffling their gear and others started walking away. One fisherman that had been retaining illegally caught kings decided to leave the area, in what appeared to be an attempt to avoid any contact with the trooper that just arrived. At this point, the undercover Wildlife Trooper that had been "fishing" for a couple of hours identified himself and stopped the man from leaving. At this point, the other fisherman in the area who had been seen snagging and retaining king salmon realized their morning was not going to go as they had probably planned.

Five illegally caught king salmon were located and seized, 10 citations were issued and one of the fishermen was arrested for an outstanding arrest warrant.

The Trooper that skipped a night of sleep (and not caught a fish all morning) headed back to his office to finish up the paperwork and take care of the fish. The seized salmon still were destined for a dinner table. A group on the charity list that lives in the Mat-Su Valley was called and they happily collected them.

