

Lake Creek CATCH & RELEASE Kings

Story and photos by George Krumm

You hear it all the time, a phrase that epitomizes what fishing on the road system for king salmon has become. It is a joyous exclamation, but at the same time it's sort of sad: "I caught my king!" One king.

Maybe the fish was caught after several trips, or perhaps some angler had a lucky first day out. Either way, it is depressing to me. One king seems to be the expectation for fishing Chinook salmon in some circles. Not in mine, though. I want more, and more can be had.

I dream of catching not one but several kings in a day's fishing. I don't need to kill them; I fill the freezer with prime silvers and sockeye most years, but I really enjoy catching big, bruiser kings.

Lake Creek on a typical year sees roughly 10,000 Chinook head up the muddy Yentna River and make a right turn into its emerald waters. Thousands more kings destined for tributaries farther up the Yentna pull over into the clearer waters of Lake Creek's three mouths, and they linger in the mixing zone and lower reaches of Lake Creek, offering anglers a shot at even more fish. Though Lake Creek is roughly 90 miles from Cook Inlet, most of the kings we caught were chrome, and several still had sea lice gracing their flanks—a sure sign that they covered that distance in just a couple days. These aren't lethargic fish that have been in freshwater for weeks; they're electric, explosive fish. Plus, every year, fish over 50 pounds are landed at Lake Creek.

Last winter, Jeff Woodward, owner of Lake Creek Lodge, invited me to come fish for a few days, citing excellent king fishing the past few years. He went on to say that the river now has regulations in place that allow for retention of kings only on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays. This emergency order made Tuesday through Thursday open for catch-and-release only. On the retention days, once you bonk a king over 20 inches, you're done for the day.

Jeff's operation is a busy place, with daily Regal Air flights dropping off hopeful anglers nearly every day; sometimes twice a day. The lodge was fairly well-booked last summer and the dates that worked out for me and Jeff were Friday, June 10 through Monday, June 13—not the specified catch-and-release days, but this time period coincided with the traditional peak of the run. I was stoked!

I showed up early at the Regal Air docks on Lake Hood, basking in the early morning sunshine of what promised to be a great day for flying. Once the gear was loaded the few of us anglers hopped in the DeHavilland Beaver and we taxied out onto Lake Hood and took off. Less than an hour later we began our descent and I noticed several boats anchored along the thin clear-water mixing zone where Lake Creek water and the Yentna merged. I wondered how they were doing as we slid onto the surface of the Yentna and taxied over to the floatplane dock in front of Lake Creek Lodge. I



At top, Lake Creek Lodge is ideally situated for anglers looking to get into the action. Inset, clockwise from top left: Daily Regal Air flights from Lake Hood in Anchorage make getting here a snap. Gear up appropriately for chasing these kings, with some bruisers topping 50 pounds. Fishing from the Lake Creek Lodge floatplane dock proved to be a good idea. A Wicked Lures King Killer.



Releasing a fresh Lake Creek king.

saw a couple anglers who had been fishing off the dock and thought it was kind of an odd place to fish, with several boats standing at the ready a few yards away that could have taken them to the famous Egg Hole downriver, or up into one of the river mouths. I would learn why later.

We unloaded the gear and put it into a cart behind a four-wheeler that would drop it off at our respective cabins. Several people were milling around the expansive lawn in front of the lodge. It was then that I met James Beasley, owner of Wicked Lures, and his pal, Jeff Finley.

Naturally the talk turned to the fishing and they explained that they'd been hammering kings for two days. When I asked what was working, James said "King Killers." Never heard of them. I asked what a King Killer was, somewhat sheepishly for I thought I was pretty well-versed in salmon lures. James showed me a spinner that appeared to be made with a size 6 brass blade with dark green Mylar on the convex side and a green 2-inch hoochie. It was not weighted, nor was it built on wire. Rather, it was assembled onto 30-pound-test Maxima Ultragreen leader material with a size 2/0 Gamakatsu Octopus hook. My first impressions weren't all that positive and I tried to not let it show. The leader was six feet long, and the hook was a 2/0—a little small, I thought. And being un-weighted, I anticipated it would be difficult to cast. Then they showed me one rigged on a rod. The leader had been cut back to roughly three feet, and a bell sinker was rigged in-line on a snap swivel that allowed various sizes of weights to be used. James explained they even tie a dropper on the snap sometimes and back-bounce them or fish them from an anchored boat. He also said being un-weighted, they spin easily in little current or at slow retrieve speeds. That made sense. Then he made an enthusiastic but hard-to-believe claim that it was the hottest lure on the river.

We loaded some spinning and baitcasting rods into a boat and headed towards the

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upstream-most mouth of the creek, which now discharges the majority of Lake Creek's flow into the Yentna. We passed several boats enroute, all back-trolling along the bank. We talked to a couple guides with clients. Slow fishing seemed to be the situation. We turned right into the mouth of what is commonly called Little Lake Creek and saw several more boats, some anchored, some back-trolling. Jeff had explained that there was a little hole a hundred yards or so into Lake Creek where we would back-bounce. I was excited about that—there's nothing like an angry Chinook trying to dislocate your elbow on the bite! The spot was open, and we anchored above it and played out line to position the boat just above the hole.

James and Jeff agreed the green King Killer had been producing well, so we started out with those. We rigged the baitcasting setups with two-ounce cannonballs on 12-inch droppers and dropped them to the bottom. The river current was just enough to keep the spinner blade turning—I could feel it thumping and buzzing eight- or nine feet below the boat. We bounced the lures downstream until they were well into the hole, and then simply held the rods. It wasn't really full-blown back-bouncing. Rather, we'd back-bounce until the lure got where we wanted it to be, then we were simply fishing spinners on anchor. We had several halfhearted bites, both while bouncing the lures downstream and while holding them steady in the current. We speculated that the bright sunshine might be

putting the fish off the bite, but still we landed and released three fish in the 15- to 20-pound range after a couple hours. Soon we headed back to the lodge for some food and to strategize about where we'd fish that evening.

We figured that if we left about dinnertime, some of the boats that had been working the holes downstream might be gone; maybe we could even get into the Egg Hole, named because back in the days when bait was allowed, it was a very popular spot to fish with roe. After motoring downstream it was clear that a couple boats were tied up side-by-side in the Egg Hole. One of them had a fish on. We went downstream and tried to anchor tight to the bank as the ribbon of fishable water was quite narrow. After hanging up in woody debris right away, we decided that spot wouldn't work. We started to motor back upstream towards the Egg Hole. They were playing another fish there. We noticed a boat leaving a spot 75- or 100 yards upstream of the Egg Hole that seemed to have a rather wide swath of clear water. As we approached, we saw a king roll. Energized and optimistic, we anchored above the hole and began to fish.

Another fish rolled 10 feet from the boat. I dropped my line over the side and estimated I hit bottom in maybe 4- or 5 feet of water.



Some Lake Creek kings can put your gear to the test, and releasing these big, hot fish helps ensure the run will remain strong in future years.

That wasn't encouraging, but since the water only had maybe two feet of visibility, it was possible that depth might produce. I had tied on a chartreuse and pink King Killer hoping it would be visible enough to get bit in the colored water. I lifted the weight off the bottom and let line slip out from under my thumb until the weight hit bottom again. My rod tip was yanked down hard! Fish on! I was dumbfounded that the fish hit basically right next to the boat in such shallow water. I played the fish and we released it, a chrome buck of less than 20 pounds.

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The next two hours were pandemonium. It seemed one of us had a fish on all the time, and we had a double or two as well. Fish were obviously piled up in this hole, and more seemed to be moving in by the number of fish we were seeing roll. The guys down in the Egg Hole were hooked up most of the time, too. The last fish of the evening seemed like a larger fish, perhaps in the 30-pound range. I hooked it on the same pink and chartreuse Wicked Lure I'd been using all evening. After slugging it out close to the boat the fish took off screaming downstream and across into the main flow of the Yentna. Jeff and James saw where this was going and James went to pull anchor while Jeff fired up the outboard. We were just turning in pursuit when the line came tight against the spool arbor. Snap! Spooled. Game Over.

The next morning I started fishing at 6 a.m. right off of the docks in front of the lodge. Light rain was falling and the low light conditions were encouraging. For casting



This big king couldn't resist a chartreuse and pink King Killer.

off the docks, I used a 9.5-foot spinning rod rated for 8- to 17-pound line. The reel was a Pflueger President 6935 spinning reel with 40-pound-test Power Pro, a half-ounce bell sinker and three feet of 30-pound-test Maxima Ultragreen leader with a silver and pink King Killer. It was easy fishing. Just cast the lure out and begin a slow retrieve, just fast enough to keep the blade thumping and off the bottom. It was also easy to tell when you got a bite—they just crushed it! I caught a 15-pounder on my first cast, and in two hours, I landed four jacks and two small, adult kings. Just before breakfast (served at 8 a.m. each day) I hooked a much larger fish—surely in the upper 20s or low 30s. It nearly yanked the rod out of my hand when it hit the lure and then put on a display of powerful, fast runs, violent head-shakes and rapid direction changes. Then it torpedoed straight out from the dock and just downstream of a mostly submerged tree. The fish stopped in the Yentna current about 30 yards out. I applied as much pressure as I thought the leader and the medium-heavy spinning rod could bear, hoping to force the fish back to my side of the snag. I pulled low hard and to the downstream side of the fish as I walked to the end of the dock. Maybe after hooking several fish that morning my leader

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was damaged, or maybe it sawed across an unseen branch near the fish; whatever the case may have been I broke the fish off. That's the way it goes sometimes.

After breakfast, Jeff, James and I hopped in a boat and headed downstream to the Egg Hole area, hoping for a repeat of the previous night's unbelievable fishing. However, we were too late. There were boats anchored in every conceivable spot. We scouted around and tried some marginal-looking water but didn't hook a fish. The same boats that were in the Egg Hole the night before were there again, and they were hooking fish with regularity using half-ounce twitching jigs. The water level seemed like it had changed; the fishable mixing zone was tighter to the bank on this day than it had been the day before. The only boats that seemed to be catching were the two tied together in the

Egg Hole. Everyone else had long faces. Since it looked like we were out of luck down there, we motored back up to our little honey hole in Little Lake Creek.

About the time we anchored, the rain stopped and the sun lit up the green foliage of June on the river banks. Jeff and I each landed mid-teens kings, but it was obvious there weren't many fish around and the bright sun and what seemed to be dropping river levels stopped fish from travelling. We sat on the hook for a couple hours but there was a definite lull in the run.

The next morning was clear and bright. More of the tree branches in front of the floatplane dock were visible, indicating that the water had dropped a few more inches. I made my first cast at 6 a.m. After an hour or so I landed a fish of about 20 pounds on a silver

and pink King Killer. I went down the point for a while, casting as far as I could into the wide bay that 10 years ago used to discharge the majority of Lake Creek's flow. Occasional fish rolled, but I didn't hook any. After an hour or so I snagged my lure on a log and broke it off. I went back to the lodge to see how the people who went out in boats did. I talked to a three different guides, and they had two fish for their eight clients. I was glad I chose to fish the docks, as it seemed not much was happening up in Little Lake Creek.

After dinner that night I again headed back to the docks, hoping a new push of fish would work its way upriver. Several of the others went down to the point. There were indeed new fish around, both at the docks and at the point. I saw Joe Burich come walking up the trail with a bona fide 30-pounder. I caught three jacks and two adults in the mid-20-pound range off the docks. All of these fish were caught on Wicked Lures King Killers.

At Lake Creek, fishing is only allowed from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., so even though there were fish present, I walked around and visited with other anglers. Everyone was in good spirits, encouraged by the push of fish that arrived that evening. The staff were busy filleting fish for those who killed kings and the campfire was burning. As the twilight deepened I reflected on the fact that in about three days of fishing, I had landed around 20 kings, give or take a few. I did much more than "catch my king."

Lake Creek is like that. Strong numbers of chrome kings that bite well are the rule here. Though many Chinook runs have suffered over the course of the past decade or so, Lake Creek's returns are healthy. It's a short enough flight from Anchorage that day-trips are feasible, but while people stand a reasonable chance of catching fish on day-trips, I wouldn't go for less than two whole fishing days, as lulls in the run do occur. To maximize your chances for catch-and-release kings, I'd recommend going during the Tuesday through Thursday no-retention days (if that regulation is in place in 2017). There will be fewer people fishing, and the popular holes are much more likely to be unoccupied, too.

Jeff's Lake Creek Lodge was comfortable and spacious, with a great dining room and cozy bar. The large front lawn is inviting, with a fire pit for relaxing. The docks are right there—you can grab a beverage in the bar and 30 seconds later you can be hooked up to 25 pounds of chrome on the docks. The cabins are well-kept, the beds comfortable, and the staff friendly and accommodating. Repeat customers are numerous, and it was heartwarming to see old friends reunited at the lodge. Many of them have known each other for years, and these long-term, repeat clients are a tribute to a great place. I can't wait to go back.



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