

Fish Topic by Species

Kokanee

Life and Times of Kokanee Salmon

The name kokanee [kō kánni] is believed to originate with the Shuswap people of the native Secwépmeč Indian tribe that still live today in a large region in East central British Columbia. The scientific name for kokanee salmon is *Oncorhynchus nerka*. Their identifying characteristics are very similar to their ocean-going brethren, sockeye salmon. Prior to spawn, kokanee are a silvery sided fish with a green or blue back and white tips on the ventral and anal fins, and little or no spotting. Spawning males develop a bright to olive green coloring on their heads, bright red body coloration, often a hooked jaw and a small, but obvious hump. Spawning females exhibit a less brilliant coloration than males, the jaw is "normal" and they retain their prespawn shape.

Kokanee live their entire life in fresh water, not migrating to the ocean. They can be found at their ideal water temperature of 48° to 58° and are seldom found in water warmer than 60°. Kokanee frequently form schools located at their ideal temperature zone which is key to fishing for them. Their size at maturity is typically 12 to 18 inches and weigh one to two pounds and considered delicious table fare, except when they turn color preparing to spawn. The California State record kokanee is 5 lbs, 2 oz., with the world record at 9 lbs, 10 oz. Juvenile kokanee eat zooplankton, small drifting organisms, and algae almost exclusively. As they mature, in addition to plankton, kokanee eat larger aquatic organisms such as copepods, shrimp, insects, and other small fish.

Where self-sustaining populations exist they migrate up streams or rivers after 2-4 years in open waters. Where stocked, they return to their release point. Females build redds on gravel bars, with both sexes defending the nest. Once the eggs are laid and fertilized, the eggs are buried beneath the gravel. Most female kokanee die within a week after spawning. Fry emerge in April through June, then move downstream to mature in lakes or reservoirs. In many Northern California water impoundments, kokanee stocks are maintained through stocking programs by Kokanee Power and the California Inland Fisheries Foundation

The following lakes are purported to have kokanee populations:

Bass Lake	Englebright Lake	Stampede Reservoir
Berryessa Lake	Fallen Leaf Lake	Lake Tahoe
Bucks Lake	New Melones Lake	Trinity Lake
Bullards Bar Reservoir	Pardee Reservoir	Tulloch Lake
Camanche Lake	Pine Flat Lake	Twin Lakes (Bridgeport)
Donner Lake	Scotts Flat Lake	

Springtime Kokanee Fishing by Jack Naves, Fish Sniffer-May 2015

It's that time of year again to dust off your downriggers, crack open cans of corn, and pull those boxes of hot pink lures out of their hiding places. Spring is here, and that means that kokanee fever is just kicking off. Some folks prefer to wait until mid-summer to target kokanee when the plankton eaters have started to put on some decent weight. For kokanee enthusiasts like me, it's hard to hold off, knowing that dancing rod tips are only a boat launch away. And besides, small ground up kokanee fillets make for the best tasting fish burgers or patties you have ever tasted!

A big mistake I see lots of early-season kokanee anglers make is fishing too deep. For some reason,

people have it in their heads that you have to fish for kokanee using downriggers. On the contrary, I like to top line my rods early in the spring when the fish are holding in shallow water. Depending on the cloud cover, wind chop, and water temperature, I will slowly move deeper using my downriggers or sinkers only as needed.

When fish are holding in the top ten feet of water, run your dodger/lure setup 100 to 160 feet behind the boat with no weight. To go deeper, just add a trolling sinker about two feet above your dodger. The space between the dodger and the sinker gives the dodger enough wiggle room to swing freely as designed.

I have a series of trolling sinkers between 3/8 ounces all the way up to 3 ounces in my tackle bag. With a range of light to heavy sinkers, I can cycle through different weights until I find the right depth.

In the spring, it's tough to use your sonar unit to pinpoint how deep kokanee are holding. Spring kokanee are usually shallow in the water column, so you may not mark much of anything on your fish finder. On overcast or windy days, the fish may be within the top ten feet of water all day long. On calm sunny days, the fish will move a little deeper as the sun moves high in the sky. If you aren't getting any action, try staggering your rods at different depths until you figure out where the fish are holding. It's a game of trial and error until you get the correct depth dialed in.

The spring kokanee setup is similar to what you would use in summer. Run some 10 pound test monofilament line from your rod and reel to a dodger. From the dodger run a 6 to 18 inch long 10 pound test monofilament leader to your lure of choice. If you want to catch lots of kokanee, shorten up those four foot long leaders that come tied to lures out of the package.

As a general rule of thumb, I run leaders from my dodgers to squids between 6 to 8 inches in length. With spinners, I run 10 to 12 inch leaders. And finally with wiggling or Apex style lures, I like a space between 16 and 18 inches between the dodger and the lure.

One shift to make in the springtime is to downsize your lure and dodger sizes for lakes featuring smaller kokanee. For dodgers, I like Sep's Sidekicks and Crystal Basin Wild Things in nickel or gold variations. Behind the dodgers, I've had good spring success with small spinners with gold blades.

With spinners, clear or purple beads seem to produce well in the springtime. Mini squids with or without spinner blades also seem to be good springtime kokanee producers. I've retied some of my smaller lures with 8 pound test and size 8 hooks just for springtime kokanee fishing. I usually keep my Apexes packed away until mid-summer when the fish start to develop hooked jaws.

Behind your lure of choice, tip each hook with a small piece of white shoepeg corn. Don't think of this as bait, but more of a target for aggressive kokanee to strike at. These fish are plankton eaters, but they want to send a message to anything that comes their way. It's a good idea to soak your corn in Smelly Jelly or Pro-Cure oil for a few days before each trip. Scents that have produced the best for me are anise, herring, and tuna.

Everybody has their own favorite scent concoction. I'm not a big believer that variations in scent make much of a difference in kokanee fishing. I think that any scent will work, as long as it masks the human scent that we rub onto our gear when handling it. I've joked that I use a 'secret' scent, but my real secret is that I don't think it makes much of a difference as long as there is some kind of scent on the lures.

Be prepared to lose at least one-third of the fish you hook early in the season. Kokanee have really soft mouths until late in the summer when they transform for spawning. Keep your drags loose, use limber

rods, and try to keep the fish from jumping (easier said than done). I've developed a method of dipping the rod tip into the water when I get fish close to the boat. I don't raise the rod until the last moment as I pull them into the net.

Lake Pardee is always a great spring time kokanee producer. Early in the season, I like to target the Mokelumme River arm of the lake from Deer Island all the way up to the Log Boom. Expect pan-sized fish in the 9 to 12 inch range. Other lakes that feature decent spring kokanee action are New Melones Lake and New Bullards Bar Reservoir.

Where the location, springtime kokanee fishing can be a great way to get your kokanee gear out of lock-down. For lakes featuring smaller fish, just down size your lures and dodgers to tip the scales in your favor. Once you get into the fish, bouncing rod tips will signal the official opening of kokanee season. It's a blast, and the blood orange fillets will keep you coming back for more.

Kokanee: The Basics — By J.D. Richey

Finding the Fish - The key to successful trolling is, of course, to find the fish. Fortunately, kokanee salmon run in large schools, so they are pretty easy to locate with electronics. When you're on an unfamiliar body of water, start your search in the main body of the lake out over the river channel. If that doesn't pan out, try the face of the dam or off the mouth of a spawning tributary. More often than not, you'll find kokes in those areas, but don't ignore deep water humps or large points that extend well out into the main lake.

Lures - Being plankton feeders, it's a bit of a mystery why kokes will hit a lure, but the truth of the matter is they will – often enthusiastically. Some of the most common offerings include small spoons, Hootchies, "Bugs," and spinners. Due to the popularity of this fishery on the West Coast, most tackle stores now have large kokanee sections. Wander through the koke area and you'll be blown away by all the different manufacturers and styles of lures they're producing.

If you need to start with a few basics, try some Uncle Larry's Spinners, Radical Glow Tubes, Rocky Mountain Tackle UV Hootchies and some Dick Nite, Sep's or Needlefish spoons. I also like to make "Squid Spins" which are hootchies with a spinner blade in front. I used to have to build them myself, but now several companies make a similar lure.

My ace in the hole lure — the one to go to when the chips are down is — believe it or not — a bare size No.2 Gamakatsu octopus-style hook (in the red, hot pink or glow finish) trolled closely behind a dodger. I know it sounds crazy, but it works. At first, it feels a little strange dragging a bare hook all over the lake but a quick couple of fish in the box will help change your tune. And if you need more evidence, take a trip up to Seattle's Lake Washington when the sea-run sockeye season opens. There will be thousands of boats on the water each day and most, if not all, will be trolling the red hook/dodger rig.

Kokes are drawn to lures of many different colors, though I tend to lean towards hot pink, fluorescent red, fluorescent orange and chartreuse. Glow-in-the-dark finishes are also gaining a huge amount of popularity these days, particularly during low light periods or when the fish are deep.

In any case, it pays to carry quite a few different colors onboard for those days when the fish are feeling a little temperamental.

Dodgers & Flashers - While there are times when you can do well without them, I always begin a day of kokanee fishing by running a small dodger ahead of my lure. Due to the popularity of kokanee trolling, many companies now make small trolling dodgers – Sep's, Vance's Tackle, Luhr Jensen and Shasta Tackle to name a few. As a dodger moves through the water, its flashy, side-to-side action will draw fish

to your offering. That same motion can also add action to your lure, depending on how long your leader is.

When using a lure that has no action of its own – say a hootchie, bare hook or bug — I'll keep my lure very close to the dodger. That way, it will pick up some movement from the dodger. I also like to use stiff mono (say 12-pound fluorocarbon) for the leader so that even more action will be imparted to the lure. Make your leader 2.5 times the length of the dodger when using low-action lures. Bump the leader to 4 times the length of your dodger if you're using active lures like spoons and spinners.

Scents - While you can catch plenty of kokanee without scent on your lure, you will certainly tip the odds in your favor by adding a little "stink" to your rig. In kokanee circles, the time-honored approach has been to tip hooks with Green Giant white shoepeg corn. For reasons not totally understood by those of us with brains larger than a splitshot, kokanee seem to have a real sweet tooth for the stuff.

These days, the whole corn thing has been taken to a totally new level. Hard-core koke anglers will often have 3 or 4 different colors of dyed corn on board, along with 15 different scents and combinations thereof. Honestly, it's getting a little crazy! I think having several different shades and flavors on hand may give you an edge on the really slow days, but I prefer to operate on the keep it simple principle and use my corn "el natural" – though I often like to marinate it in Pautzke's Kokanee Fuel overnight before I fish.

Trolling Speed - In general, slower is better for kokanee but I have caught them trolling at nearly light speed on days when the wind was howling. As a rule of thumb, keep your speeds in the .5 to 1.5 mph range and you'll be in business.