

Fall on the Feather River

"A sound hatchery program, a plethora of cold water and an outstanding fall-run Chinook fishery makes a visit to this river worthwhile!"

Don Vachini

The methodical thump, thump, thump as my roe bounced along the bottom was interrupted for a slight instant by a subtle "tap-tap" and I lifted the rod tip forcefully. Upon feeling the sting of steel, the battler nosed deep, its brute-force energy transformed to me like a laser, first to my rod, then recircuited into my abdominals, as I braced the rod there to help deter the unmitigated raw power of its high-charged runs. In a flash, the submerged dynamo burst downstream and, reel screaming and heart pounding, our boat dutifully followed!

Our party consisted of friends Jerry Kendrick, Bill Bayles, Dan Bacher, plus myself. We were on California's Feather River just north of the town of Gridley along with guide Jim Zanocco on an early October morning. Amid the frosty post-dawn chill and the soothing murmur of the river, remaining bankside growth was splotted in autumnal shades of yellows and burnt sienna. Under scrutiny from a trio of great blue herons, we were here to enjoy each other's company—and to sample the red-hot king salmon angling as well.

The Water

Created by the nation's tallest earthen dam and collecting all four forks of the upper Feather from a spacious North

Sierra backcountry, sprawling Lake Oroville, with over 167 miles of shoreline, judiciously disperses a portion of these flows back into the main river within the city limits of Oroville. From this point, the Feather bisects public land within the state-owned Oroville Wildlife Area, is bolstered by flows from Yuba and Bear river tributaries, and closely follows Highway 70 and the tiny, rural towns of Live Oak, East Nicholas, and Verona before entering the Sacramento River just north of the state capitol.

The fact is that among Pacific coast rivers, this 65-mile-long gem has been considered a prime salmon and steelhead factory for several years. While salmon runs on other rivers have declined or just now begun to regain life, this tailwater tributary has produced consistently for over 25 seasons according to Pat Overton, manager of the Feather River Fish Hatchery. As the supervisor of one of the most successful hatchery programs in the state, he solemnly believes an abundance of water is responsible for this string of piscatorial productivity. While the combination of modern hatchery practices, the release of large numbers of juvenile fish and cold flows are noteworthy components, he feels the intricate water manipulation system, which more than

guarantees healthy flows through critical periods, is the key piece to the puzzle. "If the fish have water, they will come," he reinforced, with a *Field of Dreams*-style validation.

To accommodate heavy releases from the dam, the water is channeled away from a five-mile section via the Oroville-Thermalito Complex. Temporarily stored in the Forebay and Afterbay sections—two massive man-made reservoirs—regulated flows are released from the Afterbay Outlet to join the main river a few miles downriver where it is wider and can handle the dispersed flows. The hatchery is situated in the diverted, or low-flow section.

The Hatchery

Overton speaks with pride when mentioning the hatchery. "The Feather River provides 25% of the king salmon caught along the California coast," he ascertains. "A large number of fish that go south of San Francisco are Feather River fish."

The hatchery has annual goals of 450,000 yearling steelhead, 5,000,000 spring Chinook smolts, 6,000,000 fall-run smolts and 2,000,000 fall-run "post smolts." Over the past five years, the Feather River Hatchery has received an average of 11,500 adult Chinooks and 1,400 steelhead. "The hatchery produces

20 to 27 million salmon eggs and 22 to 24 million steelhead eggs annually," he happily informs. "This is in addition to those which spawn naturally in the river."

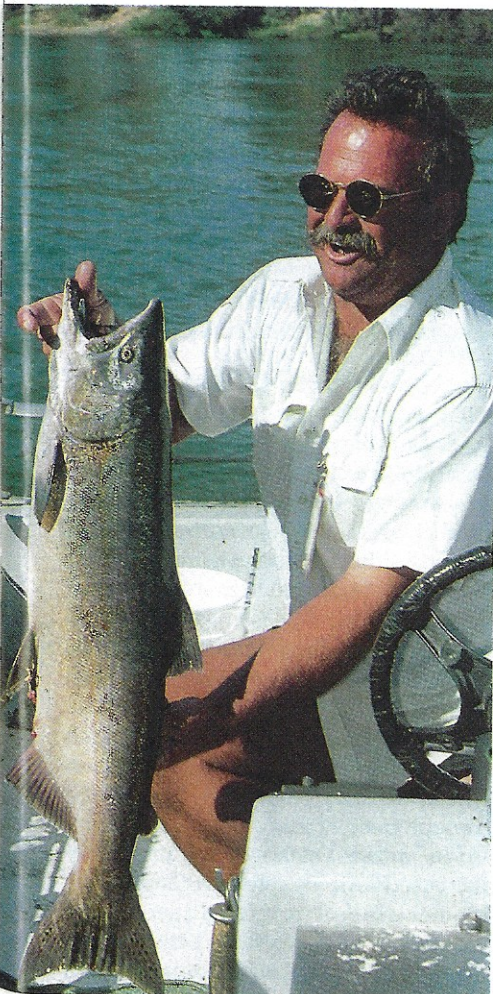
A Day on the Water

We contacted the services of Zanocco to see how these impressive numbers translated into fishing. A veteran of 24 years on the river, he virtually promised us action. "You've timed the height of the run just perfect," he beamed. "The fish are in the upper section, literally stacked on top of one another."

We launched his jet boat at a private ramp just below Gridley, we spent an hour or so testing some small holes in this vicinity without luck and then headed to the Termlito Afterbay Outlet. According to Zanocco, this is by far the most productive section of the river. "Due to the great influx of oxygenated

Left: Intensity, rough waters, and an abundance of anglers characterize the outlet hole.

Below: Guide Jim Zanocco, happily displays one of his clients Chinook. He has over 24 years experience guiding on this river.



water, it is the most logical place for the salmon to head—and for fishermen to congregate."

The sight surrounding the afterbay was unbelievable, somewhat reminiscent of the secret fishin' hole commercial. Bank anglers were lined up in shoulder-to-shoulder regimen while an armada of boats jockeyed for position in the swirling, 150-yard-wide bathtub. The intent glares of boaters as their crafts bobbed like corks combined with the muffled roar emanating from the locks and sunlight glinting off the frothy spray created by three-foot waves made for a humbling backdrop. Joining the fray, we stealthily maneuvered around a small, anchored flotilla, carefully avoided their lines then allowed the current to tow us through a narrow chute near the northern shoreline. On our first drift, Bayles hooked the initial fish of the day—a sleek 14-pounder. Then, on the next drift, it was my turn to hook up. After its initial heart-pounding run downriver, the king chose its battlefield in the next pool, which was actually to my advantage. Zanocco skillfully maneuvered the boat to stay below the fish and let it tire while swimming against the current. Even though its power was greatly diminished after 10 minutes of give-and-take action, it managed to splash us indignantly with a last-second tail slap prior to netting. Then, while thrashing in the net, the silvery 16-pound female vigorously shrugged its shoulders, again showering us with a multitude of glistening droplets.

Bacher soon joined in the fray, netting a streamlined eight-pounder which looked like it just arrived from the ocean. In six drifts, we landed three salmon. "Not a bad batting average," chided Zanocco.

Action slowed a bit and two fish and two hours later, we broke for lunch.

Necessary Techniques

While munching on a sandwich, Zanocco parted with a few tips which separate him from many other river anglers. Since he wants his clients to remember and enjoy the epic battles, he favors a medium action, 6 1/2- to 7-foot rod with a sensitive tip section to detect bites and a stiff backbone capable of "putting the muscle to the fish." A level-wind reel loaded with 17-pound-test line, 16-pound leader, 4- to 8-ounce sinkers, and plenty of fresh roe round out his basic terminal equipment.

To be successful, he feels it is common sense to not spook the fish you are working over. "A lot of people like to

Beware The "Gates of Hell"

Every season, a few shore anglers and boaters drown in the swift flows of the huge outlet pipes, aptly named "the Gates of Hell." Indeed, the treacherous, churning swells, created by the water surging out of the pipes, rock boats like a teacup in the ocean while the crowded situation often lends itself to frenetic carelessness. Not only are boaters advised to err on the side of caution but maintain wide-angled vision, observe right-of-ways, and always, always wear your life vests.

Bank anglers must not only reckon with tricky undertows but slippery rocks and aggregate as they hug the slick sides of the outlet's concrete channel. In addition to a floating vest, a belt tightened around the waistline of neoprene waders will prevent taking on water if a spill occurs.

Once in the drink, DO NOT PANIC. Basically, let your floatation device keep you above water and ride out the fast water, gradually working toward the slower water and the shoreline. Once in the shallows, crawl on hands and knees until it is safe to get out of the water.

A Place To Lay Your Head

The Oroville area offers several choices for anglers who want to get away. There are four motels with pools, spas and other amenities plus three bed and breakfast establishments.

Motels

Days Inn, 1745 Feather River Blvd., (916) 533-3297.

Grand Motor Inn (Best Western), 1470 Feather River Blvd., (916) 533-9673.

The Village Inn, 580 Oro Dam Blvd., (916) 533-7070.

The Villa (AAA approved), 1745 Feather River Blvd., (916) 533-3930.

Bed and Breakfasts:

Jean's Riverside Bed & Breakfast, 45 Cabana Drive, (916) 533-1413.

Lake Oroville Bed & Breakfast, 240 Sunday Drive, Berry Creek, (916) 589-0700.

Montgomery Inn, 1400 Montgomery St. (916) 532-1400

For additional information contact the Oroville Area Chamber of Commerce, 1789 Montgomery St., Oroville, CA 95965, (916) 538-2542.

Area Guides and Contacts:

Jim Zanocco (530) 673-5716 or see the STS guide list in this issue.

Jim Magnuson of Valhalla Sports (916) 533-2948, Craig Waters at Star Bait and Tackle (916) 742-5431, and Jerry Kendrick at Johnson's Bait and Tackle (916) 674-1912 are reliable sources of current angling information.

anchor and fish directly on top of the salmon. What they don't realize is the anchor chain or rope emits a sonic vibration in the fast flows which tends to disrupt the wary Chinook, often putting them completely off the bite."

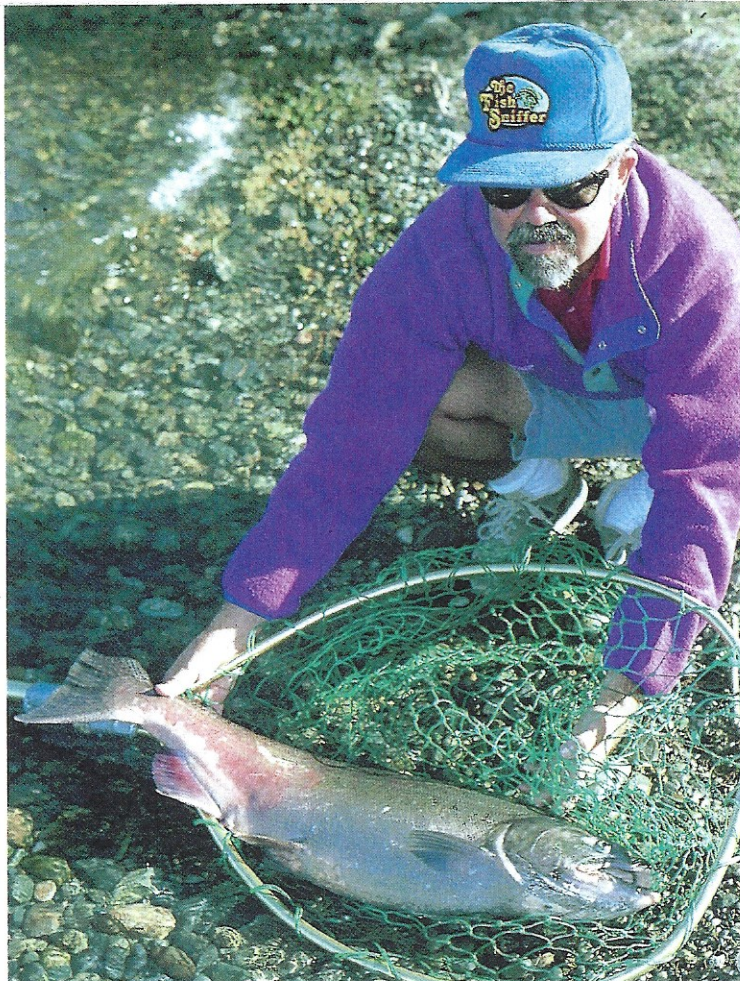
With this information in mind, Zanocco uses sonar to locate schools and then prefers to drift through the holes, many of which are 20 to 25 feet deep. "Backtroll slowly, presenting roe or spoons directly on the bottom," he advises. "After running out of depth," he continues, "move upstream and hit the same spots again."

He searches for the tailout sections or the edges of the seams between fast water and the deeper holes as salmon will often bunch up there before moving upstream. "Work right along the edge of these seams, whether using bait or hardware," he advises.

Favoring a technique called bouncing, Zanocco feels it is crucial to keep the offering moving naturally in the current on the bottom where the fish are holding and, at the same time, maintain tension on the line so you can detect any take. "This is a very demanding skill which involves a lot of concentration and split-second reaction. Remember, he asserts, if you're losing gear, you're fishing correctly."

Working from a boat definitely gives the variety edge to anglers, according to Zanocco. While he has taken salmon in the high-flow section by working Flatfish/Kwikfish with a sardine wrap, Glo Bugs, flashy spinners, single-egg roe, and nightcrawlers (for steelhead) "By far, the most successful method for my clients over the years has been bouncing roe over the fish."

When using spinners, he prefers those with a flashy, slow-moving blade (like a #5 Mepps) since they seem to provide the best action in moving water. Anglers jigging Gibbs Minnow, or trolling Flatfish, Kwikfish, Rebels, Bombers, Hot Shots, or Wee Warts also take their share of fish. Treating these lures with concoctions like Pro-Cure



The Feather River produces 25 percent of the king salmon caught along the California coast.

sardine butter or other similar scents often enhances their results.

Whether plying the high- or low-flow section, shore anglers need to approach the Feather with a bit of caution as the water levels often fluctuate rapidly, sometimes without warning. For those restricted to the bank, the gouged-out holes in front of the gates seem to offer the first crack at the holding fish and these spots are at a premium. "The term 'bring your own rock' probably originated here," joked Zanocco. "Indeed, many salmon are hooked here, mostly on hardware and roe."

Aggressive wading should be tempered with a good measure of common sense. The shallower fringe areas where the high- and low-flow waters meet to form swirling eddies, offers the next-best case scenario. Bouncing and retrieving weighty spoons in bottom-ticking, herky-jerky flutters is a very productive method. Fly tossers, however, absolutely need a high-density, fast-sinking line to achieve any hope of success. Orange or red beadheads are an extremely popular choice. Shoreline anglers must also

master the "working the line" technique, a cooperative system which allows an angler with a fish on to maneuver downstream to fight and land his fish.

Peak Times

Usually originating around the first part of August, fall-run fish start moving upstream when releases from the afterbay increase. While best times will vary by season, a good rule of thumb is to visit between the last week in September through October 15. As the season progresses, Zanocco feels the overall best spot on the river is the outlet hole. While early and late-day periods often seem to be the most productive, salmon can be pretty much taken at all times during the height of the run.

Anglers are reminded that the Feather River from a point 100 yards upstream from Thermalito Afterbay to

the mouth of Honcut Creek, is closed to salmon fishing after the 15th of October. Anglers can continue to catch steelhead and other species from this area. The river between Honcut Creek to Verona remains open to salmon fishing. Be sure to check the current sport-fishing regulations booklet carefully.

Other Species

As the salmon spawn, more and more steelhead show up, gathering around them in anticipation of some opportunistic egg-taking. Steelies on the Feather average between three and five pounds although larger fish are caught every year (a 22-pounder showed up at the hatchery last season). While roe is the consistent deceiver, red beadheads, Glo Bugs, and other egg-imitating patterns kept on the bottom work well. As the season heads into winter, the sea-run rainbows are more consistently taken on Hot Shots and Wee Warts backtrolled through deep holes.

In some instances, dramatically increased flows to accommodate Mother Nature result in involuntary plants from the afterbays. Last winter after one particularly wet storm, 10 inches of rain came to the foothills

