

The Gates Of Salmon

*Feather River anglers know the score:
If you want to catch king salmon on this river, you'll be visiting
the Thermalito Afterbay's powerful outlet pipes.*

by Don Vachini



Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Tap-tap.

For salmon anglers, there's nothing like the subtle interruption a fall-run chinook imparts on the methodical bouncing of roe along a river bottom. I answered this interruption with a rather forceful uplifting of my rod tip, swinging it so that the sting of steel jammed into the fish's jaw. The fight was on!

The battler nosed deep, its brute-force energy transformed suddenly into a powerful demonstration that was transmitted up the fishing line to me. My hands and arms handled the needs of a tight grip and uncom-

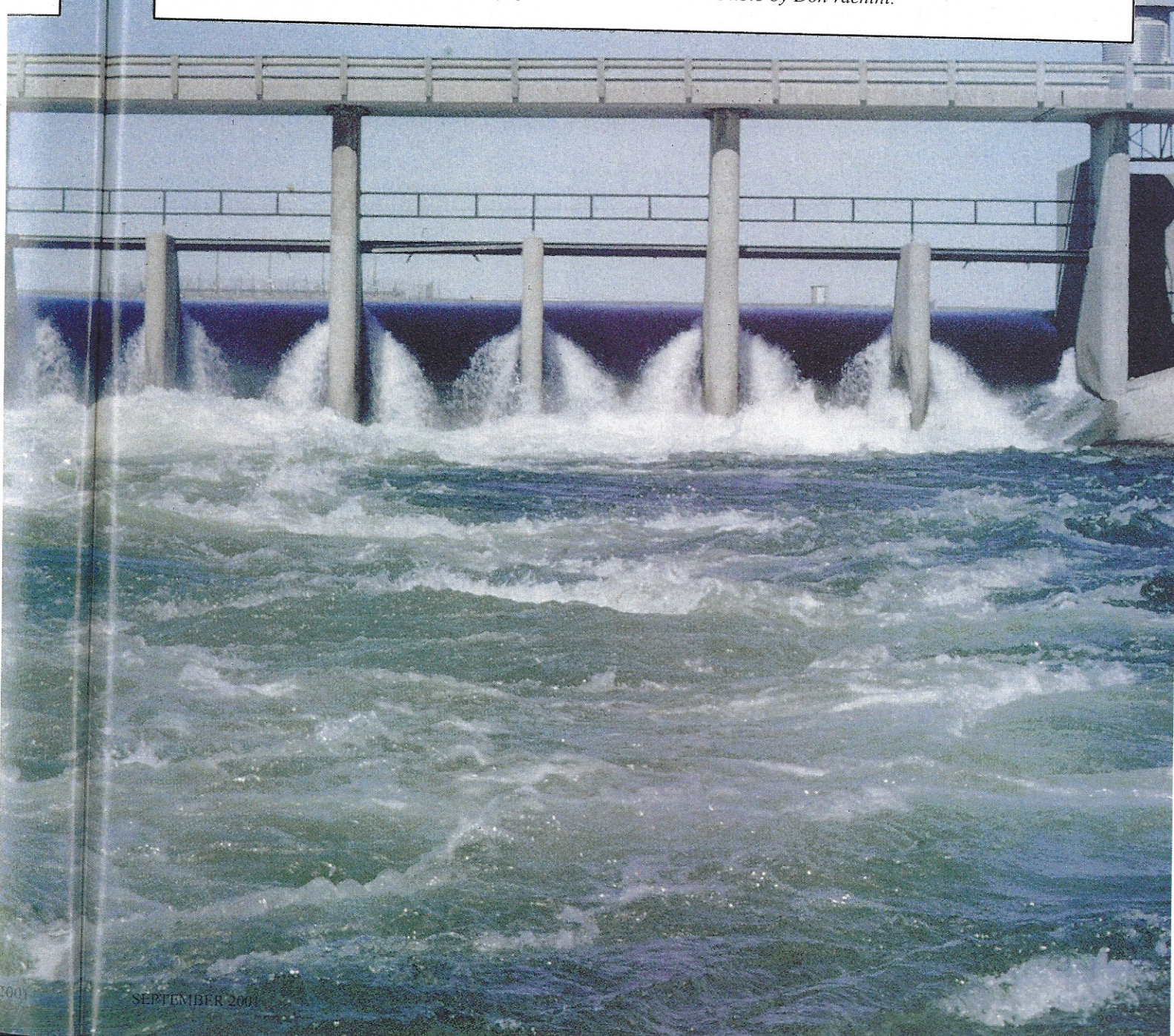
promising pressure while the fish's strength simultaneously reached my abdominal and lower back muscles. I braced myself as the fish made another charged-up run down the river.

Bill Bayles, Dan Bacher and guide Jim Zanocco were watching, and they smiled as we floated downstream with the Feather River salmon just north of Gridley.

THE WATER

Created by the nation's tallest earthen dam and collecting four forks of the upper Feather River from North Sierra backcountry, Lake Oroville is surrounded

Treacherous, swirling swells shoot from the Thermalito Afterbay, providing salmon with cool, oxygenated water. Photo by Don Vachini.



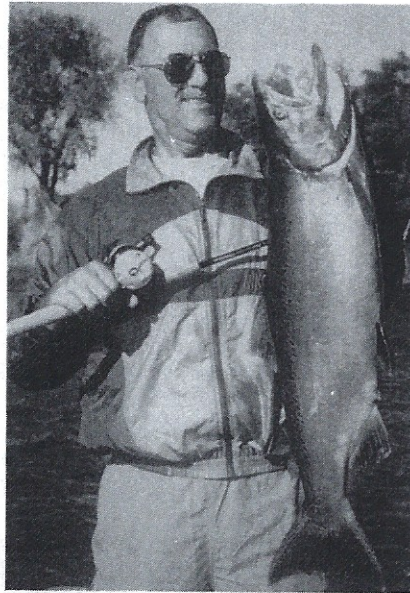
by more than 167 miles of shoreline. After borrowing from the Feather's flows, the reservoir judiciously disperses them back into the main river within the city limits of Oroville. From there, the Feather bisects public land within the state-owned Oroville Wildlife Area, is bolstered by flows from the Yuba and Bear rivers, and closely follows Highway 70 past the rural towns of Live Oak, East Nicholas and Verona before entering the Sacramento River just north of the state capital.

This 65-mile-long gem has been considered a prime salmon factory for several years. While salmon runs on other rivers have declined or have just 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, who points to an abundance of water as reason for this string of productive years. While modern hatchery practices, the release of large numbers of juvenile fish and cold flows are noteworthy components, Overton says, an intricate water manipulation system that guarantees healthy flows through critical periods is the key to this fishery's success. "If the fish have water, they will come," he says.

To accommodate heavy releases from the dam, water is channeled away from a five-mile section via the Oroville-Thermalito Complex. Temporarily stored in the manmade forebay and afterbay sections, regulated flows are released from the afterbay 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 Feather River provides 25 percent of the king salmon caught along the California coast," Overton said. "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 million spring chinook smolts, 6 million fall-run smolts and 2 million fall-run post smolts. Of those, the average returns of the past five years to the hatchery include 11,500 adult chinook and 1,400 steelhead. "The hatchery pro-



Author Don Vachini admires a 17-pound king salmon taken on the Feather River. Photo by Don Vachini.

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

A DAY ON THE WATER

We asked Zanocco to show us 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 said. "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, spent an hour testing some small holes without luck, and then headed to the Thermalito Afterbay outlet, by far the most productive section of the river.

The sight surrounding the afterbay was somewhat reminiscent of a "secret fishin' hole" commercial. Bank-anglers were lined up shoulder-to-shoulder while an armada of boats jockeyed for position in a swirling, 150-yard-wide bathtub. Thirty-five million people living in one state will do that to a fishing hole.

Boaters glared at their rods, struggling to discern a telltale *tap-tap* from the *thump, thump, thump* of their offerings well below. With the roar of water escaping the gates above us, the crafts bobbed like corks in a frothy spray of 3-foot waves.

We maneuvered around a small, anchored flotilla and numerous fishing lines, then allowed the current to direct us through a narrow chute near the northern shoreline. On our first drift, Bayles hooked a sleek 14-pounder. It was my turn to hook up on the next drift.

After its initial run downriver, my king salmon chose the next pool as its battlefield, not knowing that the advantage there would be mine. Zanocco guided the boat so as 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, the 16-pound female managed to splash us with a last-second tail slap prior to netting.

Bacher soon joined us, netting a streamlined 8-pounder that looked as if it had just arrived from the ocean. In six drifts, we landed three salmon. "Not a bad batting average," drawled Zanocco. Action slowed a bit and two fish and two hours later, we broke for lunch.

NECESSARY TECHNIQUES

While munching on a sandwich, Zanocco shared some of the philosophy that has kept him in the fishing business for almost a quarter-century. Above all, he wants clients to experience epic battles with chinook salmon. For this, he favors a medium-action, 6 1/2- to 7-foot rod with a sensitive tip (to detect bites) and a stiff backbone (capable of transferring human muscle to the fish). A level-wind reel with 17-pound-test line, a 16-pound leader, 4- to 8-ounce sinkers and plenty of fresh roe round out his basic terminal equipment.

"A lot of people like to anchor and fish directly on top of the salmon," Zanocco said. "What they don't realize is an anchor chain or rope emits a vibration in the fast flows, which tends to disrupt the wary chinooks, often putting them off the bite."

Zanocco uses sonar to locate schools of fish in 20- to 25-foot-deep holes and then drifts his bait through the holes. "Back-troll slowly, presenting roe or spoons directly on the bottom," he advises. "After running out of depth, move upstream and hit the same spots again."

Continued on page 60

PRODUCT SAFETY WARNING AND RECALL NOTICE

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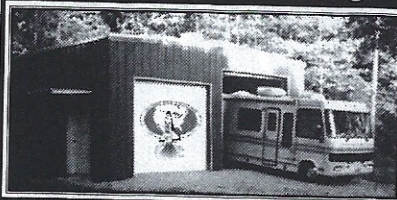
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SALMON... Continued

He searches for 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 bait moving naturally in the current on the bottom where the fish are holding, and maintaining tension on the line to detect a take. "This is very demanding and involves a lot of concentration and split-second reaction," he asserts. "If you're losing gear, you're fishing correctly."

SOME OPTIONS

Working from a boat gives the variety edge to anglers. "By far the most successful method for my clients over the years has been bouncing roe over the fish," Zanocco says. He has, however, taken salmon in the high-flow section working Flatfish with a sardine wrap, Glo-Bugs, flashy spinners, and single-egg roe.

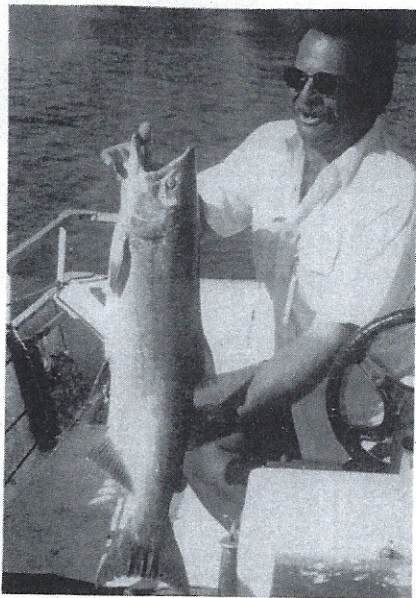
When using spinners, he prefers those with a flashy, slow-moving blade for the action they provide. Anglers jigging Gibbs Minnows, Kwikfish or trolling Flatfish, Rebels, Bombers, Hot Shots or Wee Warts also take fish here. Treating lures with sardine butter concoctions or other scents enhances their results.

For those restricted to the bank, the gouged-out holes in front of the outlet gates seem to offer the first crack at holding fish. Those spots are at a premium. "Bring your own rock," joked Zanocco. "A good many salmon are hooked here, mostly on hardware and roe."

Aggressive wading should be tempered with common sense. The shallower fringe areas, where the high- and low-flow waters meet to form swirling eddies, offer the next-best option behind dry bank-fishing. Zanocco suggests bouncing and retrieving weighty spoons in bottom-ticking, herky-jerky flutters here.

Fly-tossers will need a high-density, fast-sinking line to achieve any hope of success. Orange or red bead-heads are a popular choice.

Regardless of tackle, shoreline anglers must also master "working the line." This is a cooperative system



Feather River guide Jim Zanocco shows off a king taken just north of Gridley. Photo by Don Vachini.

that allows an angler with a fish on to maneuver downstream to fight and land his fish without becoming tangled with other fishing lines.

BEWARE THE "GATES OF HELL"

Every season, a few shore anglers and boaters get into trouble in the swift flows of the outlet, aptly named, "the Gates of Hell." Treacherous, churning swells of water surge out of the pipes, rocking boats like teacups in the ocean, and the crowded situation often lends itself to carelessness. Boaters should err on toward caution and always wear life vests.

Whether plying the high- or low-flow section, shore anglers also need to approach the Feather with caution. Water levels often fluctuate rapidly, sometimes without warning. Bankers must reckon with tricky undertows and slippery rocks 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 help prevent taking on water if a spill occurs.

If you slip into the drink, the first rule is: Do not panic. Trust your flotation device to keep you above water. Ride the waves past the fast water, and then gradually work toward slower water and the shoreline.

PEAK TIMES

Feather River fall-run fish start

moving upstream when releases from the afterbay increase, usually around the first part of August. While the best times vary by season, a good rule of thumb is to visit between the first week in September through Oct. 15.

While again working the water immediately below the outlet hole, we had managed to release a pair of males and were preparing to conclude our day. I had barely dropped my rig to the bottom when I felt my rod buck and heard my reel start screaming. The fish took an initial 100-yard run, and for 15 minutes I would not gain one bit of line on the fish, even while following it downstream.

"This could be a *big one*," bellowed Zanocco, loud enough for nearby boaters to hear over the thunder of the outlet pipes. "Might run 20, 25 pounds ..."

Other anglers gathered around to watch. Twenty-five minutes later, anticipation mounted as the leviathan gradually surfaced and became visible. But something was not right.

"Aaarrrgh!" muttered Zanocco, "It's foul-hooked!" A quick twist from Zanocco's pliers, and I bade farewell to my noble adversary. We contentedly called it a day and headed in.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The Feather River, from a point 100 yards upstream from Thermalito Afterbay to the mouth of Honcut Creek, is closed to salmon fishing after Oct. 15. 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.

The Oroville Chamber of Commerce has a list of motels and additional information: (916) 538-2542, or visit their Web site at <http://www.oroville-city.com/chamber/>.

Guide Jim Zanocco can be reached at (916) 673-5716, and 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. □

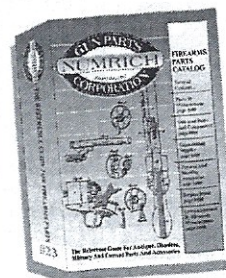
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