

The Guide's Forecast - volume 12 issue number 48

Northwest Oregon and Washington's most complete and accurate fishing forecast

Forecasting for the fishing week of **December 3rd – December 9th, 2010**

Oregon Fisheries Update:

Willamette Valley/Metro - Recent rumors of improved fishing for keepers is coming from the gorge. Given that there are very few keepers remaining on the quota, if those rumors are accurate, the fishery is likely to close very soon. The Willamette remains closed to catch and keep fishing but should provide good catch and release opportunities.

Anticipation is running high for metro area salmon anglers. Fishery managers are in the process of modeling 2011 returns and after a banner year on the Willamette last year, anglers are anxious. The Columbia run is likely to be down from last year.

Winter steelhead counts have stalled at Willamette Falls. Bright summer steelhead remain available on the Town Run in the upper Willamette when water conditions allow.

While the McKenzie is driftable, trout fishing has been poor to slow.

North Santiam water levels are high for boating. Watch for new hazards from Shelburn's to Green's Bridge.

Winter steelhead have been hooked and a few landed on the lower Clackamas. The Eagle Creek system may be a better bet this weekend however as high water will have fish on the move.

A few winter steelhead have been banked on the Sandy River but it's early for this system to fish well.

Northwest – Tillamook driftboaters have enjoyed good water conditions to fish in. Action picked up when the water and air temperatures began to rise. Anglers working the upper stretches of the Wilson remain frustrated however as fishers still pursuing chinook and steelhead below Sollie Smith Bridge seem to be intercepting the lion's share of the fish. Fair numbers of steelhead have been caught on the Wilson already, indicating a good season ahead.

The Kilchis has a few fish available but isn't fishing as good as most had anticipated. The Trask also has a few late run chinook and a rare steelhead but effort is low. The high water we're currently experiencing typically bodes well for the Dam Hole on the Trask for early run steelhead.

Smaller streams like the North Fork Nehalem, Necanicum and Three Rivers should all be prime candidates for steelhead right now but North Fork hatchery reported surprisingly few adults in the trap this week. The current rain freshet should stimulate a good push into these systems however.

The Nestucca has been a sleeper lately and in the high water, steelhead are likely to move right into Three Rivers so mainstem fishing will likely remain challenging with the exception of the mouth of Three Rivers itself.

Tillamook Bay remains void of effort. Chinook trollers still have a viable chance in the Ghost Hole after the water clears from this rain event. Sturgeon fishing should be good but little effort exists. A nice tide series starts today but by the weekend, low slack will take place after dark.

Tides will be too strong for good crabbing this weekend. The lower Columbia and Netarts Bay will

be the best bets and with a possible delay in the commercial opener, recreational crabbing should remain productive.

Southwest – Crabbing has slowed in bays and estuaries as heavy rains have lowered salinity which always slows Dungeness take. Ocean crabbing opened December 1st. Ironically, after a wild fall, the ocean looks like a possibility for crabbers and fishers this weekend.

The wild coho fishery slowed for trollers on Siltcoos Lake over the past weekend.

Winchester Bay anglers have been doing well for bottom fish off the south jetty when conditions allow safe access. Fishing on the Umpqua has been slow with high, muddy water shutting down the bite.

Winter steelhead have yet to show in the Coquille.

South Coos anglers are taking a few chinook but catches are slowing and most fish are dark.

The Elk and Sixes have been productive lately with some boats taking multiple chinook. High wind has been problematic at times. The ocean fishery off the mouths is closed as of December 1st. Bullard's Bridge should be open during the day but call ODOT to confirm.

Winter steelhead are showing in the lower Rogue with results expected to improve in coming weeks. High, muddy water has challenged steelheaders on the middle Rogue although fishing has been fair at times. The upper Rogue continues to offer the best chance of a hookup with a late-season summer steelhead despite slowing due to higher water.

Boats launching early out of the Port of Brookings have made good catches of rockfish nearshore but few ling cod. Cold water slowed the chinook bite over the past week on the Chetco River although persistent boaters dragging wrapped plugs continued to take a few fish. Low water temperatures didn't prevent early winter steelhead from biting however, as several were taken. December is shaping up to be a good month. The Chetco was 2,700 and dropping on Tuesday this week.

Eastern – A few good-sized trout are being hooked on the Metolius where bull trout are also available.

Steelheading has been good on the Grande Ronde but at last report, a cold snap had formed slushy ice in the river.

SW Washington – The Cowlitz is a good option for early run steelhead and this particular run seems to average larger than most for this time of year. Early returns look positive for a good return this season.

The Lewis and Kalama still have a few dark coho present but anglers are focusing more on winter steelhead returns. Fishable numbers should be available for the next several weeks. The Washougal is also an option.

Klickitat coho anglers still have access to fair numbers of fish but success rates are starting to drop and fish are beginning to color up.

Columbia River Fishing Report – Despite some recent rumors of the sturgeon bite picking up in the Bonneville area, creel reports indicate otherwise. A rare keeper was tallied on the gorge

and a few from the Portland to Longview stretch. Anglers sure wished they had access to the Willamette this time of year but an explosive catch on the re-opener shut that fishery down. Cooler water temperatures will continue to slow the catch, even with only a few fish left on the quota for the year. Anglers will be looking forward to the re-opener on the Willamette at the beginning of the year as this rested fishery will provide some fast and productive fishing in 2011.

The only real story on the Columbia right now is the steelhead fishery in the John Day Pool and that fishery isn't even performing like it has in the past. Bank anglers are struggling but 18 boats tallied 14 steelhead, of which 10 of those were released as wild fish. Traditionally, this fishery would be producing catches twice as good as this on some years.

Larger walleye are often sought after this time of year as they typically move to deeper water. Water temperatures may make them more lethargic however but a change of tactics can still produce fair results.

Crabbing in the lower Columbia remains productive and may so for a bit longer as the commercial fleet quarrels with processors on what price they will get paid. Commercial crabbers are unlikely to fish for a while longer.

The pikeminnow bounty program paid out \$1.2 million in six months during 2010. One angler made \$81,366 fishing from May through October 10th, \$6,000 of which were tagged pikeminnow worth \$500 each. For information on taking part in this fishery in 2011, go here: <http://www.pikeminnow.org/>

The Guide's Forecast – With little on tap, anglers won't have quite a quandary of options that they'll have to choose from. If you're a steelheader, head east and fish the John Day Pool. The current warmer weather may stimulate a better bite in the John Day River itself as well as the reservoir just upstream of the dam. Work bobber and jig in the John Day River itself and troll plugs in the pool.

Sturgeon fishing will likely remain slow in the gorge. There are just a few hundred sturgeon on the quota left to harvest. It may be best to wind up the season until the warmer spring flows return. The Willamette is the next best fishery on tap but that will have to wait a few more weeks before it reopens.

Crabbing won't be all that good this weekend. A strong incoming tide during daylight hours will limit the period of productive crabbing time one may have. If you do go, be sure to pick up your gear before the tide starts running strong or you'll have to wait until it slows again before you find it (and that may be after dark!).

Willamette, McKenzie & Santiam Rivers Fishing Report – Water temperature at Willamette Falls is in the lower 40s with visibility about 2.5 feet

Lower McKenzie water levels have been fluctuating but have periodically allowed fishing.

The Santiam system has been too high recently to fish well.

Purchase a \$30 day-use pass for only \$25 during the month of December. This pass is not only good for the remainder of 2010, but all of 2011 as well and is valid at every park in Oregon that charges a fee. Here is a list of vendors for the entire state:

http://www.oregon.gov/OPRD/PARKS/dayuse_permit_vendors.shtml

The Guide's Forecast – The last update on November 24th showed 260 winter steelhead had been counted at Willamette Falls. At that rate in 2009, only 70 had crossed the Falls. This early return would indicate a good 2010 season. A few Clackamas-bound winter steelhead are being taken by plunkers at Meldum Bar. Summers remain available on the Middle Fork and Town Run on the upper Willamette.

Diehards watching the McKenzie water levels are finding trout sluggish in cold water. Nymphs fished at mid-day through early afternoon are taking some reddsides. Dress appropriately for this activity.

North Santiam anglers may catch a break this week with dry weather as Detroit Reservoir is near winter level lows making further water release unnecessary. There are still summer steelhead in the river, many of which remain in good enough condition to keep.

Clackamas and Sandy River Fishing Reports – Clackamas water levels are forecast to be dropping through the weekend and into early next week. Winter steelhead have entered with recent rainfall and should be up to Eagle Creek in the coming week.

The water is high and off-color on the Sandy but will improve with dry weather. Coho fishing is over with only a few dark fish still around.

The Guide's Forecast – Winter steelhead are entering the Clackamas where fair fishing should occur over the coming weekend with prospects improving in the coming weeks. Concentrate efforts on the lower river and while dry weather this week will have water levels dropping, which is good, warmer rain will raise cold water temperatures which would be even better.

Despite the fact that returns on the Sandy have been of broodstock origin for some time which generally results in fin-clipped winter steelheading returning on a similar (later) schedule, sufficient winters have returned early to provide a fair to good fishery here recently. It remains to be seen if the early return continues or tapers off with the bulk of the run coming in January and February. Try it from Dabney downriver.

North Coast Fishing Report – With Chinook still on the mind of many, anglers are commonly coming up empty handed with the exception of a few guys working the Wilson tidewater. Of course, the recent rain event has put the late fall fishery on hold but by the time you get done reading this newsletter, boats will be launching in pursuit of the seasons last Chinook.

Pro guide Brandon McGavran (360-607-1327) did well early in the week (Monday) when he went 3 for 7 on the lower Wilson. It's almost as if the fish knew the rain was coming, staging in the lower reaches before the system hit. Brandon fished on Sunday too, going 2 for 2 with both fish identical 9 pound hatchery winter steelhead. He caught both of those fish on K-15 plugs.

Boaters upriver on the Wilson struggled to find fish. I've found when there aren't a lot of fish around, the boats working the lower river tend to do the best (by culling out the biters). This has clearly been the case for the late season Chinook.

Too late for this report, the Kilchis should be fishing good today although prior to the rain freshet, it too has been a bit slow. The Trask has also petered out and will likely be finished for the season.

With few exceptions, Chinook is about over on the north coast. There may be some pods of fish moving through into mid-December but you'll have to really hunt them if you plan on succeeding.

Winter steelhead are in the queue and early returns are looking good. Confirmed catches have happened in many coastal systems and smaller streams with adequate hatchery plants will be the topic of discussion this weekend.

Still no word on sturgeon in Tillamook Bay but favorable tides are taking place right now. By the weekend, the low slack will happen after sunset, making sturgeon fishing a poor option and maybe even a bit dangerous. Not a great time to get stuck on a sandbar out there (been there, done that!).

A recent weather change had a favorable looking forecast turn south just overnight. With an east wind influence however, nearshore boaters and crabbers may be able to take advantage of some fair opportunities over the weekend. Keep your eye on the weather, the crabbing should be fantastic out there assuming the commercial gear doesn't fish. They're striking right now due to low price.

Offshore fishing may be a bit more of a challenge if the east wind comes up as predicted. Keep your eyes on the forecast here: <http://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/data/Forecasts/FZUS56.KPQR.html>

The Guide's Forecast – Here's a river-by-river breakdown on what's likely to happen this week. Starting from the north:

Highway 30 streams (Big Creek and Gnat Creek) – Some steelhead should begin to show. Since these are small systems, they are likely already fishing by the time of this writing. Anglers working these waters should use smaller baits and lighter lead. They can be snaggy and watch for private property as it certainly makes up the bulk of the watershed where the hatchery fish return.

Necanicum River- Should be in perfect shape at the time of this writing. It should also fish fair on Saturday but by Sunday, you'll likely be dragging the boat in some of the shallow tail-outs. There should be catchable numbers of fish around but boaters still need to be ready for hazardous conditions.

North Fork Nehalem- This should be a good option for bank anglers, especially near the hatchery. Fish will be on the move in the high water currently taking place and since we've already seen some fair numbers return to the hatchery already, expectations are running high. The number of fish taken this weekend will be a clear indicator as to how the rest of the season will shape up on this river system.

Mainstem Nehalem (South Fork)- Too early for the wild fish that return to this system. It's become a good January bet however. Stay tuned.

Kilchis River- Should be fishing good now but not many early run steelhead return to this system anymore. Some Chinook should be available but overall, it hasn't been a good year here. There may be a few late running chum too but don't harass these fish, it's actually illegal right now to target chum.

Wilson River- Probably the best north coast bet as it will have Chinook, Alsea stock steelhead and a few early returning broodstock steelhead. You can target both species in the same water in higher flows but as flow subsides, steelhead will remain in the tailouts and shallow slots while the

Chinook will hold in the deeper, slower water. As the water level drops, the lower stretches will become the better bet.

Trask River- Maybe a rare Chinook or hatchery steelhead. The crowds should be most favorable here this weekend. There will be dark Chinook here as well. Leave them alone!

Nestucca system- With the exception of the mouth of Three Rivers, this system will be too high for productive mainstem fishing. Wait till flows subside considerably more.

Three Rivers- another top bet for steelhead this week as hatchery returns should be viable. This river will peak soon.

Tillamook Bay- Should be good for sturgeon but tidal opportunities will pass by the weekend. Chinook seekers may still have a chance in the Ghost Hole and Bay City but like any other system, don't go with high expectations.

Crabbing should pick up on Netarts and the Ocean as commercial crabbers won't be soaking pots for a while longer, at least until the price per pound comes up.

Central & South Coast Reports – Pressure is heavy from crabbers in Yaquina Bay although crabbing has been poor to slow.

Trollers at Tahkenitch had good results this week with several fish taken in the wild coho fishery here. Tahkenitch will remain open through the end of 2010. Siltcoos has been slow to fair.

Tenmile is open for wild coho through December or a quota of 500 fish. Catches have been slow to fair for a mix of bright and dark coho. A blue-green algae advisory remains in place for Tenmile.

The Umpqua has pushed fresh, muddy water into Winchester Bay which has shut down crabbing here. Umpqua mainstem anglers have taken several mostly wild and dark coho but winter steelhead have started entering and a few have been taken. Numbers of winters will improve through December and the ODFW believes the return of hatchery fish will be much improved this season due to heavy smolt releases in 2008. Fishing on the Morth Umpqua is slow with the water level up and water temperature down. While the South Umpqua opened to hatchery steelhead retention at the 1st of December and a good return is expected this season, no catch reports have come in.

Coos Bay crabbers continued to take decent numbers as of Tuesday this week. Steelheaders on the Coos River are catching winters with the East Fork of the Millacoma and South Fork Coos most productive.

Winter steelhead are due in the Coquille River but there have been no reports of any catches.

As of this writing on Thursday, December 2nd, the Elk and Sixes water level is up and muddy. These small ocean tributaries change rapidly, however with the Elk falling into shape virtually overnight and the Sixes following suit a day or two later. There are Chinook scattered in both systems but check wind forecasts before heading out. Fishing is expected to be good as water levels drop. With the ocean fisheries of the mouths of these rivers closed as of December 1st, upriver fishing is the only option.

Dave Pitts of salmontroutandsteelhead.com sent this in early this week, "The Elk continues to produce kings for both bank and drift fisherman. Anglers fishing the bank under the 101 have been connecting on kings well into the mid twenty pound range. As drifters pulling plugs and back bouncing roe or a sand shrimp roe cocktail are seeing limits of bright Chinook action. The Elk and its neighbor the Sixes are two rivers that need to be targeted on they're flows. They are both small rivers and note it does not take many boats to become crowded."

A few winters have been caught in the lower Rogue but it's early and results are expected to improve into December. The lower river was flowing at over 8,000 cfs mid-day on December 2nd. Anglers on the Grants Pass stretch are taking a few summer steelhead and coho. Winters are yet to show but should be in this stretch in a week or two. Upper Rogue fishers have continued to score late-season summer steelhead and, with fishing pretty good, pressure is building. The upper river is in the lower 40-degree range.

As the Chinook fishery begins to wind down on the Chetco River, the winter steelhead season has just started. Winters have hit smaller plugs and drifted eggs while late-season but fresh Chinook are being taken by back-bouncers or on wrapped plugs. The Checto blew out once again on Wednesday this week. As of Thursday it was about 8,500 cfs and cropping. When the Chetco flows increase to over 4,000 cfs, all is not lost; this is the time to hit the bank and switch to plunking but only once the water level starts dropping. Use large (size 2 or 4) Spin 'n' Glos on a rig with enough lead to hold it in place. A bit of shrimp or small cluster of cured eggs will sweeten the deal.

"Todd Puett hook clients and brothers Jack and Guy on the Smith into a 56 pound hawg 49" long by 30" in girth."



Photo courtesy Dave Pitts of salmontroutandsteelhead.com.

Central and Eastern Oregon – Although the curtain is gradually closing on the summer steelhead season at the lower Deschutes, there are still good numbers of fish available and, with

late arrivals, anglers are encountering a mix of bright and brightly-colored specimens.

Washington fishing reports:

From the WDF&W Weekender Report for December 2010

North Puget Sound

During the holiday season, area anglers have a decision to make: cast for steelhead in the local rivers or head out onto Puget Sound, where fisheries for crab and blackmouth salmon are under way.

Marine areas 7 (San Juan Islands), 8-1 (Deception Pass, Hope Island and Skagit Bay), 8-2 (Port Susan and Port Gardner) and 10 (Seattle/Bremerton) are open for **salmon** fishing. Anglers fishing those marine areas have a two-salmon daily limit, but must release wild chinook salmon.

Steve Thiesfeld, Puget Sound salmon manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), said anglers who put time in on the water could hook some nice-size fish, especially around the San Juan Islands. "Anglers fishing for blackmouth in December traditionally have had success in the San Juan Islands," he said. "The catch rates in the San Juans are some of the highest and the salmon tend to be a little larger."

Thiesfeld reminds anglers that salmon fishing in Marine Area 9 (Admiralty Inlet) closes Dec. 1. **Crabbing** also is open in some marine areas of Puget Sound. Marine areas 4 (Neah Bay), 5 (Sekiu), 6 (eastern Strait of Juan de Fuca), 9, 10, 12 (Hood Canal) and 13 (south Puget Sound) are open for sport crabbing seven days a week through Jan. 2.

The daily catch limit in Puget Sound is five Dungeness crab, males only, in hard-shell condition with a minimum carapace width of 6¼ inches. In addition, fishers may catch six red rock crab of either sex per day, provided those crab measure at least 5 inches across. Additional information is available on the WDFW website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/crab/>.

For a change of pace, anglers in the region may want to venture out in the evening and try jigging for **squid** in Puget Sound. Good spots include the Elliott Bay Pier in Seattle and the Edmonds Pier. More information on squid fishing is available on the department's website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/squid/>. Information on fishing piers is available at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/piers/>.

In freshwater, several rivers are open for **steelhead** fishing, including the Skagit, Snohomish, Skykomish, Snoqualmie and Green (Duwamish). "Fishing for hatchery steelhead really gets going around mid-December, when we traditionally see the peak of the run," said Bob Leland, WDFW's steelhead program manager. "As long as the weather cooperates and the rivers stay fishable, anglers should have some good opportunities to hook a steelhead."

Leland reminds anglers that Whatcom Creek, and portions of the North Fork Nooksack, North Fork Stillaguamish and Samish rivers close Dec. 1. For details on the early closures, check the rule changes at <https://fortress.wa.gov/dfw/erules/efishrules/>.

Rainbow trout are another option for freshwater anglers, who might want to try casting for lunkers at Beaver Lake near Issaquah. About 2,300 hatchery rainbows - averaging 2 to 3 pounds each - were released into the lake in early November. Beaver Lake, which is one of several westside lowland lakes open to fishing year-round, is best fished by small boat, although anglers also can be successful fishing from shore.

Other good bets during December are Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish, where anglers can hook **perch**, **cutthroat** and **smallmouth bass**. Anglers targeting perch should fish near deep ledges, said WDFW fisheries biologist Danny Garrett, who recommends using nightcrawlers. "Perch are generally caught within a couple feet of the bottom," he said. For cutthroat or smallmouth bass, try trolling deep, 30-100 feet or more. "Anglers will likely have to put in some time to hook a smallmouth, but those that do could catch a big fish," Garrett said.

South Sound/Olympic Peninsula

The holiday season has arrived and with it comes opportunities to hook hatchery steelhead on several coastal streams, crabbing and salmon fishing in Puget Sound and razor clam digs on five ocean beaches.

An early December **razor clam** dig has been approved at Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks and Kalaloch. Opening dates and evening low tides are:

- Dec. 3, Fri. - 4:43 p.m., (-0.8 ft.), Twin Harbors
- Dec. 4, Sat. - 5:29 p.m., (-1.2 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Dec. 5, Sun. - 6:14 p.m., (-1.3 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Dec. 6, Mon. - 6:56 p.m., (-1.2 ft.), Twin Harbors

Later in December, razor clammers will have another opportunity. Tentative opening dates and evening low tides for that dig are:

- Dec. 31, Fri. - 3:40 p.m., (0 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Jan. 1, Sat. - 4:31 p.m., (-0.4 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Jan. 2, Sun. - 5:18 p.m., (-0.7 ft.), Twin Harbors

Clam diggers are reminded that they should take lights or lanterns for the nighttime digs and to check weather and surf forecasts before heading out. No digging will be allowed before noon on any of the five razor-clam beaches. Harvesters are allowed to take no more than 15 razor clams and must keep the first 15 they dig, regardless of size or condition. Each digger's clams must be kept in a separate container.

All diggers age 15 or older must have an applicable 2010-11 fishing license to harvest razor clams on any beach. Licenses, ranging from a three-day razor clam license to an annual combination fishing license, are available on WDFW's website at <https://fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov> and from license vendors around the state.

Meanwhile, **winter steelhead** fisheries are under way in the region, where more and more hatchery fish are expected to move into rivers as the month progresses. During the last week of November, anglers were catching large hatchery steelhead on some rivers, said Kirt Hughes, regional fishery manager for WDFW. "December and January are prime months for hatchery steelhead fishing, and should be productive for anglers as long as the weather cooperates and the rivers stay in shape," he said.

Anglers fishing the Quillayute and portions of the Bogachiel, Calawah, Hoh, and Sol Duc rivers have a daily limit of three hatchery steelhead. In the Grays Harbor area, anglers fishing the Chehalis, Humpstulips, Satsop and Wynoochee have a daily limit of two hatchery steelhead.

Bob Leland, WDFW's steelhead program manager, reminds anglers that they will not be allowed to catch and keep **wild steelhead** on eight Olympic Peninsula rivers until mid-February. Earlier

this year, the annual opening date for wild steelhead retention was changed from Dec. 1 to Feb. 16 on eight rivers with fisheries for wild steelhead.

That change, adopted by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission last February, applies to fisheries for wild steelhead on the Bogachiel, Calawah, Clearwater, Dickey, Hoh, Quillayute, Quinault and Sol Duc rivers. Those eight rivers are the only waters in Washington where wild steelhead retention is allowed.

The change was made to protect the early portion of the run, said Leland. He noted, however, that anglers will still have an opportunity to catch and keep a wild fish during the peak of the return. "Making this change will help to maintain the diversity of the run - including a range of late and early returning fish - that is important in preserving the wild steelhead population," Leland said.

Rather catch **salmon**? Anglers can find **late-run coho** salmon in some of the region's rivers, including the Chehalis and Satsop, where "nickel bright" fish have been hooked. For **winter chum** salmon, anglers should try fishing the Nisqually River. The late-chum run doesn't hit full stride until mid- to late December and generally remains strong until at least mid-January, said Steve Thiesfeld, WDFW fish biologist. "The Nisqually is a good fishery and the chum are typically bright and in good shape," he said. The Puyallup River also is a good option for anglers looking to hook South Sound chum.

Portions of Puget Sound also are open for salmon. Anglers fishing marine areas 11 (Tacoma-Vashon Island) and 13 (South Puget Sound) can keep one chinook as part of a two-salmon daily limit. On Hood Canal (Marine Area 12), anglers have a daily limit of four salmon, but only one of those fish can be a chinook. Anglers are reminded that marine areas 5 (Sekiu) and 6 (eastern Strait of Juan de Fuca) are closed for salmon fishing.

Crabbing also is an option in some marine areas of Puget Sound. Marine areas 4 (Neah Bay), 5 (Sekiu), 6 (eastern Strait of Juan de Fuca), 9 (Admiralty Inlet), 10 (Seattle/Bremerton), 12 (Hood Canal) and 13 (south Puget Sound) are open for sport crabbing seven days a week through Jan. 2.

The daily catch limit in Puget Sound is five Dungeness crab, males only, in hard-shell condition with a minimum carapace width of 6¼ inches. In addition, fishers may catch six red rock crab of either sex per day, provided those crab measure at least 5 inches across. Additional information is available on the WDFW website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/crab/>.

An ADA-accessible fishing site is now open at the Bingham Creek Hatchery to persons with disabilities who permanently use a wheelchair, have a reduced fee license and/or who have a designated harvester card. More information is available at <http://bit.ly/b5PLcy>.

Before heading out, anglers should check the rules and regulations for all fisheries on WDFW's website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/regulations/>.

Southwest Washington

This year's **winter steelhead** season got off to a promising start around Thanksgiving, when the first wave of fish started taking anglers' lures in several tributaries to the lower Columbia River. With decent river conditions, catch rates should continue to improve in the weeks ahead, said Joe Hymer, a fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

"Despite cold weather, that first jag of winter steelhead was definitely on the bite," Hymer said. "So long as the rivers don't rise too high or fall too low, we could be looking at a darn good fishery this year."

Best bets for winter steelhead include the Cowlitz, Lewis, Kalama, Grays, Washougal, Elochoman and White Salmon rivers, and Salmon Creek in Clark County. All have a two-fish daily limit, but Hymer cautions anglers to check the Fishing in Washington rules pamphlet <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/regulations/> for other rules specific to each river.

As with all steelhead fisheries in southwest Washington, only hatchery fish with a clipped adipose fin and healed scar may be retained. All wild steelhead must be released.

Water conditions, often highly variable at this time of year, can make a big difference in angler success, Hymer said. "If the water is too low, the fish get spooky - if it's too high it can be dangerous to be out there," he said.

As basic preparation for a steelheading trip, he recommends checking the Northwest River Forecast (<http://www.nwrfc.noaa.gov/>) or other sources before heading out. "Most anglers do best when water levels are rising or dropping," Hymer added. "It's a lot harder to catch steelhead in the peaks and troughs."

In deciding where to fish, it may also help to know how many smolts were planted in specific rivers and how many adult fish have returned to area hatcheries, Hymer said. In the first case, he recommends checking WDFW's smolt-planting schedule for 2009, available at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/plants/steelhead/>. WDFW posts hatchery returns on a weekly basis at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hatcheries/escapement/>.

While winter steelhead are the main attraction right now, **late-stock coho** will continue to bite through December. Most of those fish are too dark for consumption, but some bright fish will make their way into anglers' creels, Hymer said. Best bet is the Cowlitz River where over 70,000 fish have returned this year.

Hymer also flagged several new fishing regulations that take effect Dec. 1 on specific rivers:

- **Grays River** - Opens to fishing for hatchery steelhead, hatchery coho, and adipose and/or ventral fin clipped chinook from the Highway 4 Bridge to the South Fork. The open area on the West Fork also expands from the hatchery intake/footbridge to the mouth that day.
- **Green River, North Fork Toutle River, and mainstem Toutle** from mouth to forks - Fishing is closed for hatchery steelhead and hatchery salmon.
- **South Fork Toutle River** - Fishing for hatchery steelhead is closed from the 4100 Bridge upstream. Fishing remains open under selective gear rules from the mouth to the bridge.
- **Lewis River** - The night closure and anti-snagging rule is lifted from Johnson Creek to Colvin Creek, although anglers may not fish from any floating device in that area until Dec. 16.
- **Blue and Mill creeks (tributaries to Cowlitz River)** - Blue Creek opens to fishing for hatchery steelhead and sea-run cutthroats while Mill Creek opens to fishing for hatchery steelhead.
- **Wind River** - Catch-and-release fishing is closed for game fish above Shipherd Falls.
- **Klickitat River** - Closed to fishing for trout, hatchery steelhead and salmon, except for salmon fishing from the Fisher Hill Bridge downstream. The salmon season from the Fisher Hill Bridge downstream remains open through January.
- **Swift Reservoir** - Closed to fishing.

Meanwhile, a **razor clam** dig has been approved early this month at Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks and Kalaloch. No digging will be allowed on any of those beaches before noon. Opening dates and evening low tides are:

- Dec. 3, Fri. - 4:43 p.m., (-0.8 ft.), Twin Harbors
- Dec. 4, Sat. - 5:29 p.m., (-1.2 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Dec. 5, Sun. - 6:14 p.m., (-1.3 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Dec. 6, Mon. - 6:56 p.m., (-1.2 ft.), Twin Harbors

WDFW has also scheduled a second dig this month, subject to the results of another round of marine toxin tests. Tentative opening dates and evening low tides for that dig are:

- Dec. 31, Fri. - 3:40 p.m., (0 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Jan. 1, Sat. - 4:31 p.m., (-0.4 ft.), Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks, Kalaloch
- Jan. 2, Sun. - 5:18 p.m., (-0.7 ft.), Twin Harbors

Rather catch a **sturgeon**? Winter conditions have chilled catch rates from Bonneville Dam downriver to the Wauna power lines, but new seasons will open Jan. 1 from Bonneville to McNary Dam.

Fishery managers from Washington and Oregon will seek public comments on issues affecting Columbia River white sturgeon management and fisheries at meetings in early December in Longview and two locations in Oregon. The three meetings are designed to share information on developments that will shape sturgeon management starting next year. The meetings are scheduled at the following times and locations:

- **Longview:** Dec. 6, 6 - 8:30 p.m. Cowlitz Co. Public Utility District, 961 12th Ave.
- **Clackamas:** Dec. 7, 6 - 8:30 p.m. ODFW Northwest Region Headquarters, 17330 S.E. Evelyn St.
- **Astoria:** Dec. 9, 6 - 8:30 p.m. Holiday Inn Express, 204 West Marine Dr.

The news for **trout** anglers is that WDFW plans to plant thousands of rainbows averaging a half-pound apiece in five area lakes this month - weather permitting.

In Clark County, LaCamas Lake is scheduled to receive 8,000 fish early this month; Battleground Lake, 5,000, in the middle of the month; and Kline Pond, 5,000, distributed between the middle and end of the month. Icehouse Lake in Skamania County will also receive 1,500 fish in the middle of the month.

Anglers should also be aware that Merwin Park and the Yale Park boat ramp will be closed through December while PacifiCorp stabilizes the shoreline and extends the boat ramp at Yale Park. Additional docks will also be installed at Yale Park and the parking area will be reconfigured to include a route for the disabled.

Eastern Washington

The region's four winter-only **rainbow trout** lakes open to fishing Dec. 1 and WDFW fish biologists say they all are at top production. "Catch rates in our pre-season test fisheries averaged greater than five fish per hour," said central district fish biologist Chris Donley. "That means there are thousands of eager biters in all of these winter lakes."

Southwest Spokane County's Hog Canyon Lake, 10 miles northeast of Sprague, has rainbows ranging from 10 to 15 inches, with most around 12 to 13 inches. Hog Canyon was treated in the fall of 2009 to rid the lake of tench and brown bullhead, and re-stocked this spring with 10,000 catchable-size rainbows and 5,000 rainbow fry. "Fishers need to remember the catch limits at

both Hog Canyon and Fourth of July lakes," said WDFW Enforcement Sergeant Dan Rahn. "They can have a total of five trout, but only two can be over 14 inches."

Compliance with that rule will be especially critical at Fourth of July Lake, two miles south of Sprague in Lincoln County, where Donley reports the bulk of the fish are running 12 to 15 inches, with several up to 17 inches. Fourth of July Lake was also rehabilitated in the fall of 2009 to rid it of fathead minnows. The lake was restocked with 15,000 catchable rainbows and 40,000 rainbow fry.

The other two winter season trout lakes are in Stevens County - Hatch Lake, about five miles southeast of Colville, and Williams Lake, which is 14 miles north of Colville. Both were treated in the fall of 2008 to eliminate yellow perch (and goldfish in Williams), and both were restocked this past spring and in 2009.

Hatch Lake received 850 catchable rainbows and 10,000 rainbow fry in 2009, and 6,000 catchable rainbows this year. Those fish are now ranging in size from 10 to 16 inches, with most 12 to 14 inches. Williams Lake received 950 catchable rainbows and 20,000 rainbow fry in 2009, and 10,000 rainbow fry this year. They now range from 10 to 14 inches, with the bulk of the fish around 11 to 13 inches.

Whether any of the four winter trout lakes will provide safe ice-fishing early in the season depends on the weather. According to U.S. Coast Guard guidelines, no one should venture onto lake ice unless it is at least four inches thick, clear and solid. As much as nine inches may be needed to safely support snowmobiles or other vehicles. Such ice depths can form after at least a week of below freezing temperatures, both day and night.

Ice depths vary throughout a waterway due to underwater structures, springs, geothermal activity, and water movement caused by flows, wind, or waterfowl use. Rivers and streams rarely have safe ice because of constant currents. Thawing and re-freezing can create air pockets that leave ice "honeycombed" or porous and significantly weakened.

Drilling a hole in the ice from a safe, near-shore location can give anglers an idea of ice depth. However, drilling only provides an estimate of the ice depth because shallow water near shore freezes quicker than deeper water in the middle of a lake, where springs may slow the freezing process.

WDFW does not measure ice on fishing lakes and cannot guarantee ice fishing safety. But here are a few tips to help keep an outing safe:

- Don't fish alone. Let others know exactly where you and your fishing partners are going and when you plan to return.
- Keep fishing holes small and few. When drilling fishing holes with an ice auger, keep the diameter under eight inches. Bigger holes are not necessary to land fish and can create a safety hazard for others.
- Watch your step. Avoid ice fishing near feeder streams or known springs; brush, logs, plants or docks; multiple ice cracks or ice that is popping or otherwise audible; and dark-colored ice that may be weak.
- Spread out. Too many people congregated in one area may be more than the ice can safely support. Disperse weight and fishing holes.
- Be prepared for weather conditions. Dress in layers and wear thermal underwear, fleece or wool, and wind and waterproof outerwear, especially for feet, hands and head. Take extra clothes, food, water, sand for on-ice traction, and a sled for easy on-ice transport of all equipment.

- Be prepared for emergencies. Carry equipment such as ice picks or awls, rope, and personal flotation devices. Also pack a first-aid kit and matches for starting a fire.

Donley says there's also good trout fishing opportunities through the winter at several large year-round waters, including Rock, Sprague and Waitts lakes. Net-pen-reared rainbows are usually a good bet at Lake Roosevelt, the huge reservoir off Grand Coulee Dam.

Northcentral Washington

Three Okanogan County **rainbow trout** lakes switch from catch-and-release fishing to catch-and-keep fishing on Dec. 1. WDFW district fish biologist Bob Jateff says Big Green, Little Green, and Rat lakes offer a daily trout catch limit of five fish that can be caught on bait.

Jateff notes that year-round Patterson Lake near Winthrop can be good for **yellow perch** during the winter. Bait can be used and there is no daily limit on perch. "In fact, anglers are encouraged to retain as many perch as possible regardless of size in order to better balance the fish populations in the lake," he said. Jateff reminds anglers using the Patterson Lake access site to have a valid WDFW vehicle permit displayed.

Fish and Roses lakes in Chelan County provide good fishing during December and throughout the winter. Yellow perch and trout are the main species in Fish Lake and trout is the main species in Roses.

Jateff cautions anglers at any fishing lakes about ice that is just starting to form during the month of December. According to U.S. Coast Guard guidelines, no one should venture onto lake ice unless it is at least four inches thick, clear and solid. As much as nine inches may be needed to safely support snowmobiles or other vehicles. Such ice depths can form after at least a week of below freezing temperatures, both day and night.

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- Be prepared for emergencies. Carry equipment such as ice picks or awls, rope, and personal flotation devices. Also pack a first-aid kit and matches for starting a fire.

Jateff said that **steelhead** fishing in the upper Columbia River tributaries slows down as air temperatures continue to drop during December. However, boat anglers on the mainstem Columbia above Wells Dam should have better success on the open water. Areas to try would be just upstream of Wells Dam and at the mouth of the Methow River in Pateros. Selective gear rules are in effect, except bait is allowed in the mainstem. There is a mandatory retention on adipose-fin-clipped hatchery steelhead, and a night closure.

Steelhead fishing on the mainstem Columbia picked up at the end of November with reports of fish being caught below Wells Dam, at the mouth of the Entiat River, and in the area across from the Eastbank Hatchery. Selective gear rules are in effect for the mainstem and bait is allowed.

Southcentral Washington

Catch rates for **hatchery steelhead** have picked up in the Hanford Reach, and should stay on course through the month of December, said Paul Hoffarth, a regional fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). The question, though, is whether anglers will brave the elements to catch those fish as they move upriver.

"Angler participation definitely drops off as we head into the winter months," Hoffarth said. "Also fishing tends to get spotty - good one day, bad the next. But the fish are still out there for those who want to catch some."

As with all area steelhead fisheries, only hatchery fish with a clipped adipose fin and healed scar may be retained. All wild steelhead must be released.

The Yakima River Basin is closed to steelhead fishing, but the **whitefish** season opens Dec. 1 on both the Yakima and Naches rivers. As before, the catch limit is 15 fish per day, but anglers are required to use one single-point hook, measuring no more than 3/16 inch from point to shank (hook size 14).

Anglers fishing the Yakima River above Roza Dam may use bait, as noted in the Fishing in Washington rules pamphlet. Trout fishing is catch-and-release.

Trout anglers should be aware that Mattoon Lake got 120 broodstock rainbows in late November, as did Fio Rito Lake. But WDFW fish biologist Jim Cummins cautions against trying to fish through the ice on any lake in the region in the coming weeks. "It's not safe," he said. "Most lakes are only partially frozen and the chances of falling through the ice are just too great."

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GOOD LUCK!