

The Guide's Forecast - volume 13 issue number 49

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

Forecasting for the fishing week of **December 16<sup>th</sup> – December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011**

**Oregon Fisheries Update:**

**Willamette Valley/Metro-** As the Columbia enters its winter slumber, anglers just received news of great spring chinook returns in 2012. Although fish have been historically caught as early as January, March and April are prime months pending spring run-off on the mainstem. Seasons are likely to be set later in January.

Flows at Willamette Falls are low with the water temperature falling to the high 30s. These conditions have stalled winter steelhead movement. The sturgeon bite is also likely to slow but the Portland Harbor will likely remain the best bet for those seeking fair to good catch and release activity. Smelt will continue to be a top bait and although smelt is officially listed under the Endangered Species Act, it may still be used as bait.

Thawing tributaries bumped the McKenzie flows at Vida from 2,300 cfs to 2,900 cfs over the past weekend. It will be dropping this week.

Flows are stable on the Santiam system although fishing is slow.

Flows are decent on the Clackamas but the water is extremely clear. Fishing has been poor. Water levels are forecast to increase next week.

The Sandy River has dropped and will remain clear in cold weather. Effort is light and justifiably so. Steelhead will enter in better numbers by February.

**Northwest –** Steelheaders continue to hope for precipitation although a significant event is not in the near-term forecast. Steelhead are likely pooling up in the lower reaches of most north coast systems with tidewater a viable option for the few that know how to utilize this stretch of a coastal river.

First light can take fish in the most productive drifts but that's also when air temperatures are nearly the coldest. Bobber and jigs or small deep diving plugs will produce the best results but success will improve dramatically with any rise in river levels. Driving conditions are hazardous so travel with extreme caution.

Some chinook are still being taken in Tillamook Bay and its larger tributaries. Trollers working herring in the Ghost Hole are still catching an occasional fish and a driftboat working the lower Trask reportedly tied into a few bright chinook earlier this week. Anglers should consider releasing female chinook this time of year as even bright hens cut pale in color, making them poor tablefare.

Good sturgeon tides begin on Sunday for adventurous anglers willing to brave the cold on Tillamook Bay. Afternoon tides may make the outing more tolerable however. Sand shrimp will be a top bait.

Ocean crabbing opens up today with only small windows of opportunity typical for recreational boaters this time of year. Commercial pots will be out in force so crabbers may want to avoid competition by utilizing coastal estuaries instead. The lower Columbia River remains the best bet.

Good razor clam tides begin early next week with Clatsop Beaches likely to produce the best

results.

**Southwest** – While bank anglers can keep cabezon until the end of the year; currently off-limits to boaters, they'll be off limits to all recreational users from January 1 until April 1, 2012.

Much to the relief of commercial and recreational Dungeness enthusiasts, the delayed ocean crabbing season will open for the most part on Thursday, December 15th, with Dungeness filled out sufficiently to retain. Crabbing will not be allowed from north of Gold beach to the California border until January 15th.

Lack of precipitation in the district has anglers anxious for rain. Steelhead season should be well underway but most rivers are low and clear with lack of rain this month.

Winchester Bay is producing well for crabbers. Summer steelheading is slow on the North Umpqua and winters have yet to enter the South Umpqua.

Crabbing is excellent and the quality of Dungeness has improved in Coos Bay. Rockfishing has been worthwhile on the south jetty and catches have been excellent when boats have been able to cross the bar.

Low, clear water has stalled steelheading on the lower and middle Rogue. Summer steelhead are biting plugs on low flows on the upper Rogue but they're colored up. Smoke anglers are still taking fish that are deemed good enough to smoke. Coho are being taken in this stretch as well.

When boats have been able to get out of Brookings Harbor, rockfish catches have been good with a few lings in the mix. Fishing is slow for late chinook and winter steelhead on the Chetco River although occasional flurries of steelhead are coming in.

Chinook fishing is usually good at this time of year on the Elk and Sixes but lack of rain has resulted in slow results.

**Eastern** – John Day steelheaders are finding nice, bright fish above Service Creek but most are natives which must be released. Brace for cold weather and chilly, fluctuating water levels here.

Effort in the John Day Pool is slowing, as is the success rates. It was a productive season.

The Grande Ronde is beginning to ice up, making for poor steelheading. Success rates will likely pick up again if temperatures warm.

**SW Washington** – Steelhead fishing is excellent on the Cowlitz River and should continue through the month. The best action is near the trout hatchery with boaters reporting almost a fish per boat average. Side drifted bait will produce the best results this time of year.

The Kalama and North Fork Lewis are also steelhead options but aren't producing nearly like the Cowlitz system.

The Washougal is also a fair option with improving numbers into mid January.

**Columbia River Fishing Report** – With sturgeon fishing continuing to slip, anglers are ready to hang it up on the Columbia right now. Bonneville Pool sturgeon fishing may be a better bet than downstream fisheries and anglers interested in this area may want to comment when the department gives the opportunity:

## **Anglers invited to comment on 2012 Bonneville Pool sturgeon season**

Dec. 8, 2011

SALEM, Ore. -- Staff from the Oregon and Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife will discuss options for managing the 2012 recreational white sturgeon fishery in the Bonneville Pool of the Columbia River at a public meeting on Dec. 14 in The Dalles.

The meeting will go from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at The Dalles Screens Shop, 3561 Klindt Drive, The Dalles 97058.

According to John North, ODFW Columbia River fisheries manager, the meeting allows staff an opportunity to meet with local sturgeon anglers to discuss ideas and options for the retention fishery in Bonneville Pool during the coming year.

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Downstream crabbers are still interested in sport opportunities out of Hammond and although the commercial pots went in a few days ago, action should still be good for those participating in the fishery. The fresher the bait, the better the results. Crab near buoy's 20 and 22 as well as the lower tongue of Desdemona Sands. It remains good.

**The Guide's Forecast** – You'll need to know what you're doing to find success for sturgeon this time of year on the lower Columbia. Good luck, you'll need it.

Fair late afternoon tides this weekend but high slack happens after dark. You may want to focus your efforts on low slack as that can be just as productive. Dress for the weather and be very cautious if you're towing your boat over the mountain. Cool weather may cause hazardous driving conditions.

**Willamette, McKenzie & Santiam Rivers Fishing Report** – Willamette flow at the Falls has been unaffected by light showers this week. Winter steelhead passage has stalled in 39-degree water. According to a news release from the ODFW on Wednesday this week, the biologist's prediction for the 2012 Willamette River spring Chinook return is 83,400, slightly higher than this year's actual return of 80,254. This should allow for fishing seven days a week and a two-fish per day bag limit.

As of this writing mid-morning Thursday, December 15t, the McKenzie River has shown no effect from overnight showers on the live graph at Vida.

The Santiam system is in decent shape for fishing but there are darned few fish to be had here.

Walling Pond and Walter Wirth Lake are scheduled to be planted with legal and larger trout this week.

Recently, a new formula for estimating the weight of a steelhead by measuring is promises to increase the accuracy of the result. For years, steelheaders have used the girth squared times the length divided by 800. The latest equation calls for the length squared multiplied by the girth multiplied by ,0007 (Weight = L X L X G X .0007). Your mileage may vary but we would enjoy hearing from readers who compare the two methods on steelhead that have been weighed to see if the newer formula is indeed more accurate. Please note that the latter formula is not accurate for salmon.

**The Guide's Forecast** – Winter steelheading will resume for plunkers on the banks of the lower Willamette below the Clackamas River in weeks to come. Rain will certainly help to get these fish on the move.

Winter trout fishing is generally worthwhile on the McKenzie but summer steelhead is about over.

There's not much available for the angler on the North Santiam other than late-late season summer steelhead. There will be a worthwhile catch-and-release fishery for native winter steelhead but that will occur in the New Year. We'll let you know when it's worth the trip for those to whom this sort of fishery is appealing.

**Clackamas and Sandy River Fishing Reports** – The only effect showers overnight on Wednesday this week seems to have had on the Clackamas is stopping the drop in water level. It did nothing to alleviate a clear water situation here. Whether a few drops of H<sub>2</sub>O will entice a couple of winter steelhead into the system remains to be seen but it certainly wasn't enough to be a deal-changer.

Light rain has no effect on the Sandy River, either. In cold weather, the Sandy is predictably clear and is low with the lack of December rain.

**The Guide's Forecast** – The Clackamas is most promising for fresh winter steelhead around High Rocks and above but after a little rain this week, you're likely to have company in this stretch.

Although the Sandy has had only late-running broodstock steelhead plants for years, there are some early winters in the river and prospects here are the best in the valley. Try good-quality cured eggs. It'll only get better in the coming weeks and improve in the New Year as more fish enter.

**North Coast Fishing Report** – Steelheaders are trying to eke out early season enthusiasm but it's been hard to come by with the low water conditions lately. Steelhead aren't waiting for rain to swell the rivers as fish are present but tentative to bite.

Most recently an avid angler floating the Mills Bridge to Sollie Smith (Wilson River) stretch reporting a large pod of hovering steelhead just downstream from the now gone Guide Shop near Mills Bridge. The two anglers casted furiously to the riffle holding fish, taking just one in what they described as a pack of nearly 20 they estimated. The twosome took a second hatchery fish lower in the drift and reported effort in the deeper drifts downstream. There are still nice chinook being caught although even bright hens are cutting a bit pale right now.

Other river systems are seeing small spurts of fish, as is common on the smaller streams that most north coast steelhead returns witness this time of year. On these smaller streams, steelhead are more likely to pool up in the tidewater stretches before the next rain freshet rises river levels. That rain freshet is underway as I write this portion of the report. More on that in the forecast section.

The Trask was also rumored to have a few fresh fish present with one boat reporting a 4 steelhead day (all wild) and 2 bright chinook for a Loren's Drift to Highway 101 drift the other day. It's not uncommon to get bright, late-run chinook on the Trask and a good batch of steelhead this early in the season bodes well for this native managed watershed. Hatchery strays are not unheard of on this system.

The Kilchis is bare-bones, at least for now but that could change in the near future. The low, clear water is showing how good the chum run was this year as carcasses line the river banks, fertilizing the relatively barren river system compared to what it once was. It was clearly one of the better returns of chum salmon in recent history. No sign of willing steelhead although a few should be present.

The Necanicum should be much like the Kilchis. As soon as the river swells, the action should improve dramatically. Until then, the few that know how to fish tidewater, should see a good return on your investment using bobber and jigs or bait on the right time of the tide.

The North Fork of the Nehalem has been slow although some fish are present at the hatchery. A few fish have been taken daily but mostly for the anglers utilizing the disabled fishing platform. Only a handful (7) fish were worked from the trap this week. It's much the same story on Three Rivers (tributary of the Nestucca). Fish just aren't moving much from the mainstem portions of these rivers or tidewater stretches for that matter. Ditto for the Highway 30 systems; pray for rain.

Chinook seekers are still working the lower Wilson River and Tillamook Bay. Effort has dropped off in Tillamook Bay and anglers are starting to think more seriously about sturgeon fishing on Tillamook. There should only be a few late season stragglers coming through the estuary and they should make their way upstream on this next rain freshet. Effort has been low for sturgeon thus far.

Crabbers are still trying on Netarts Bay and some on Tillamook as well. Action has been fair but you had better plan on putting in some effort to expect any decent results. It seems the adults have moved a bit offshore from the close quarters we witnessed in the fall this year but make no mistake, there are some quality keepers out there.

**The Guide's Forecast** – With an ever-changing river forecast, you never know what you're going to get. On Tuesday, it looked like the Wilson was going to get a half-a-foot rise in river levels which would have stimulated some interest from both the angling community and the quarry. Now it looks like only a fraction of that is in the forecast and although that should help a little bit, don't expect any river system to bust wide open after the small series of storms hits our coast. It's been a nice stretch of winter weather lately however; I'm getting some outside projects done...

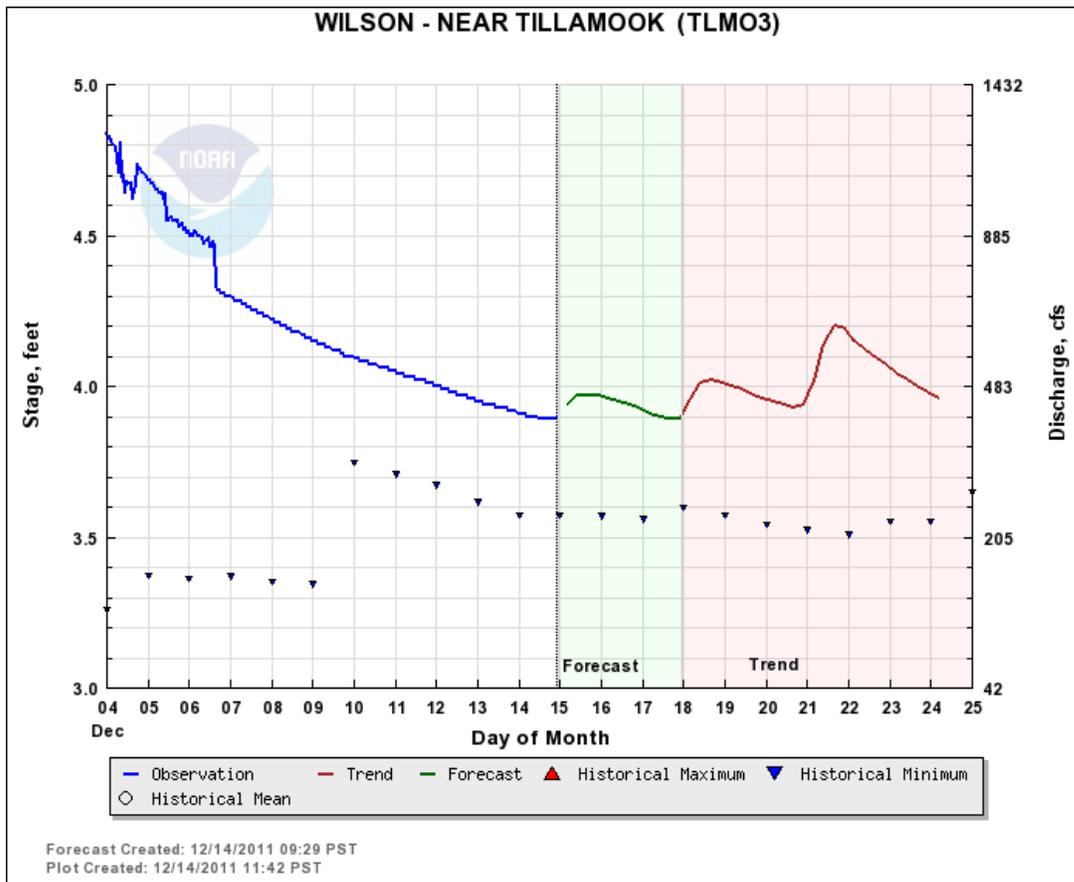
Larger streams like the Wilson and Nestucca will remain the top options for steelheaders and the Wilson will still likely have chinook in the lower reaches; some may even be bright bucks which would make for a nice Christmas surprise. Backbounced eggs will produce the best results and offer up the best opportunity for more than one chance in a hole. Plugs may be effective too but you'll want to drop down to a smaller size with a fair chance at intercepting a steelhead too. The Wilson and Kilchis are really the only viable options for late season chinook and with the Kilchis still low and clear, the Wilson will likely be the only option for a while longer. Remember, this season closes at the end of December.

Unless river conditions change more dramatically than they are forecast on the north coast, expect the best action to remain in the tidewater stretches or extreme lower reaches of most north coast streams. In order of likely success rates, the tidewater stretches of these rivers should produce some results for bobber and bait/jig fishers or hardware tossers (to a lesser degree):

1. North Fork Nehalem- fish around Aldervale or downstream,

2. Necanicum River- fish from the Golf Course to the 12<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge,
3. Wilson River from Sollie Smith Bridge downstream with a few fish available to first boat from Mills Bridge downstream,
4. Nestucca River near the mouth of Three Rivers, not a bad place to plunk eggs either!
5. Kilchis and Highway 30 streams; extreme lower reaches of tidewater sections may hold a few willing fish
6. Trask River- lower reaches may have a few straggler hatchery steelhead and some wild fish. This river should be ranked just after the Wilson but the lack of hatchery fish may put anglers off looking to other systems for a consumptive option.

Here's the Wednesday night river prediction for the Wilson, which many north coast streams follow:



As you can see, no significant rise in river levels (>.5 foot rise) is in the foreseeable future.

Late fall chinook may still be an option on the Wilson or Kilchis as we already mentioned but Tillamook Bay may harbor a few more biters on an incoming tide in the Ghost Hole and at Bay City. Decent sturgeon tides start on Sunday so target keeper sized fish in the west channel or middle channels using sand shrimp for bait.

Crabbing will be best on the afternoon high tides near the estuary mouths but use EXTREME caution as the swell is expected to build over the weekend. Here's the offshore forecast as of Wednesday night:

**FRI**

SE WIND 5 TO 10 KT. WIND WAVES 2 FT. W SWELL 8 FT.

**FRI NIGHT**

SE WIND 5 TO 10 KT. WIND WAVES 3 FT. W SWELL 8 FT.

**SAT**

SW WIND 5 TO 10 KT. WIND WAVES 2 FT. W SWELL 9 FT.

**SAT NIGHT**

NW WIND 5 TO 10 KT...BACKING TO W AFTER MIDNIGHT.  
WIND WAVES 2 FT. W SWELL 12 FT. CHANCE OF RAIN.

**SUN**

N WIND 10 TO 15 KT. WIND WAVES 4 FT. W SWELL 12 FT.

**MON**

W WIND 5 TO 10 KT. WIND WAVES 3 FT. W SWELL 11 FT.

Ocean crabbing is now open but offshore opportunities are a rare thing this time of year. Look for an east wind to knock down the swell to pursue crab and bottomfish in what would likely be a productive opportunity.

**Central & South Coast Reports** – Ocean crabbing opened today, December 15th following a delay of the December 1st opener due to Dungeness being in poor condition and light in weight as they had not filled with meat. Now the crab are full and the season is underway. It's too early for live reports prior to TGF deadline but great results are expected whenever offshore conditions allow.

Boats were able get out this week for bottomfish with good but varying results. When it was possible to get out to deep water haunts, limits of ling cod were about universal with bonus rockfish in the catches, When it wasn't possible to get out to the ling haunts, anglers have filled out limits of rockfish.

The weekend to come doesn't look promising for those hoping to get out on the ocean for crab or bottom fish. Swells are predicted to increase in height starting Friday and increasing through Sunday.

Traps and rings in Yaquina Bay have been taking fair to good catches of crab.

Recreational boats launching out of Depoe Bay this week have scored fair sized lings and excellent catches of rockfish with mostly limits for all.

Trollers dragging plugs or spinners have had little to show for their efforts for wild coho at Siltcoos Lake over the last week with the weather so dry.

Crabbing has been excellent in Winchester Bay with most boats taking limits of Dungeness which are large and chock full of meat. While not as productive, dock crabbing has also been decent. Rock fishers are taking perch and greenling off the south jetty but be aware that sand shrimp are tough to find locally. Seelheading on the mainstem Umpqua will get underway with rain which is needed to get fish moving. A few fresh winters are being caught but fishing is tough with the

water so low and drift-boating is hard on hulls. Steelheading remains slow on the North Umpqua and, without precipitation, winters are yet to arrive on the South Umpqua.

Coos Bay has been producing good crab catches as has the lower Coquille near Bandon. Winter steelhead have started entering both rivers with the season only starting here.

Low, clear water on the lower Rogue has slowed the burgeoning winter steelhead fishery. Only a few are being taken here and there but catches will improve as the run is just getting started here. Low flows and cold water has slowed fishing on the middle river although there are summer steelhead and coho in this stretch. While there's not a lot of water in the upper Rogue and it's a little on the cool side, summer steelhead suitable for smoking are being caught along with the occasional coho. Fishing is fair.

Chetco water levels have been such that a slowing of results with winter steelhead is to be expected. Given that, the numbers of winters being taken daily, albeit primarily by local guides, comes as a bit of a surprise. It's certainly not hot fishing but a handful are being landed daily despite less-than-optimum water conditions. It will be interesting to see how the Chetco fares with overnight precipitation on the 14th which is increasing the flow from about 2,350 cfs.

Forecasts indicate it should peak at around 3,450 cfs on Friday, a good flow for fishing, then drop rapidly into the coming week. With early numbers very good, the coming weekend should produce well for winter steelheaders.

The southwest corner of the state received a fair shot of rain overnight on Wednesday this week which will bring fall

Chinook into the Elk and Sixes. This will result in a brief flurry of action here but this is a narrow window of opportunity as these small systems will fall as rapidly as they rise.

**Central and Eastern Oregon** – While summer steelhead which are in the Deschutes won't be spawning until February or March next year, it's a tough time of year to hook up. There are a few around, some are being caught around Maupin and every so often, the stars align and a hatchery fish hits the bank which is bright enough to take home, but this isn't prime time for lower Deschutes steelheading.

Lake Billy Chinook is providing fair to good results for bull trout.

Crescent Lake has been slow for trollers trying for Lake trout. The few that are being taken are of good size, however.

### **Washington fishing reports:**

***From the WDFW Weekender Report for December 2011***

#### **North Puget Sound**

For most area anglers the holiday season is a time to choose between fishing for steelhead in the region's rivers or heading out on Puget Sound for crab and blackmouth salmon.

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 all open for **salmon** fishing in December. Anglers fishing those marine areas have a two-salmon daily limit, but must release wild chinook salmon.

John Long, statewide salmon manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), said anglers could do well fishing for blackmouth, especially around the San Juan Islands. "Traditionally, anglers have had success fishing for blackmouth in the San Juans this time of year," he said. "Of course weather can be a factor, but if conditions are good and you put time in on the water you could hook a nice-size fish."

Long reminds anglers that salmon fishing in Marine Area 9 (Admiralty Inlet) closes Dec. 1. Before heading out, anglers can check [creel reports](#) for information on catch and effort in Puget Sound. Recreational fishery samplers with WDFW collect the information each week at fishing access sites throughout Puget Sound.

**Crabbing** also is open in some marine areas of Puget Sound, including marine areas 4 (Neah Bay), 5 (Sekiu), 6 (eastern Strait of Juan de Fuca), 7, 8-1, 8-2, a portion of Marine Area 9 north of a line that extends from Olele Point to Foulweather Bluff, 11 (Tacoma-Vashon Island) and 13 (South Puget Sound).

In each area, crabbing is allowed seven days a week through Dec. 31.

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](#).

All crab caught in the late-season fishery should be recorded on winter catch cards, which are valid until Dec. 31. Winter cards are available at license vendors across the state. Catch reports are due to WDFW by Feb. 1, 2012. For more information on catch record cards, visit WDFW's [catch record card webpage](#).

For a change of pace, anglers in the region may want to venture out in the evening to jig for **squid**. Good spots include the Elliott Bay Pier in Seattle and the Edmonds Pier. More information is available on the department's [squid fishing webpage](#). Information on fishing piers is available [here](#).

In freshwater, several rivers are open for **steelhead** fishing, including the Skagit, Snohomish, Skykomish, Snoqualmie and Green (Duwamish). Bob Leland, WDFW's steelhead program manager, said as long as the rivers stay in shape anglers should have some good opportunities to fish for steelhead during the month. "Fishing for hatchery steelhead picks up around mid-December, when we traditionally see the peak of the run," he said.

**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, catch crab and salmon in Puget Sound and dig razor clams on ocean beaches.

Early in December, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) will proceed with an evening razor clam dig if marine toxin tests are favorable at Long Beach, Twin Harbors and Mocrocks. The tentative opening date and evening low tide is:

- Dec. 10, Sat. – 6:30 p.m. (-0.5 ft.); Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Mocrocks

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

- Dec. 22, Thurs. – 4:40 p.m. (-0.9 ft.); Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Mocrocks
- Dec. 23, Fri. – 5:29 p.m. (-1.4); Long Beach, Twin Harbors, Copalis, Mocrocks

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 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 2011-12 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](#) and from license vendors around the state.

Meanwhile, **winter steelhead** fisheries are under way around the region, where more and more hatchery fish are expected to move into rivers as the month progresses. "Fishing for hatchery steelhead is usually at its best in December," said Kirt Hughes, regional fishery manager for WDFW. "Fishing should be productive for anglers as long as the weather cooperates and the rivers stay in shape."

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, Humptulips, Satsop and Wynoochee have a daily limit of two hatchery steelhead. Rather catch **salmon**? Anglers can find **late-run hatchery coho** salmon in some of the region's rivers, including the Chehalis, Satsop and Skookumchuck. For **winter chum** salmon, anglers might want to try fishing the Nisqually River. The late-chum run hits full stride mid- to late December and generally remains strong until at least mid-January, said Hughes.

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.

Before heading out, anglers can check [creel reports](#) for information on catch and effort in Puget Sound on WDFW's website.

**Crabbing** also is open in some marine areas of Puget Sound, including marine areas 4 (Neah Bay), 5, 6, 7 (San Juan Islands), 8-1 (Deception Pass, Hope Island and Skagit Bay), 8-2 (Port Susan and Port Gardner), a portion of Marine Area 9 (Admiralty Inlet) north of a line that extends from Olele Point to Foulweather Bluff, 11 and 13

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Before heading out, anglers should check [WDFW's sportfishing regulations pamphlet](#) for details on all fisheries.

### **Southwest Washington**

This year's **winter steelhead** season got off to a promising start just before 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 recent high water and 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."

Before planning a trip, anglers should be aware that Long Beach and several other ocean beaches are tentatively scheduled to open for evening **razor clam** digs Dec. 10, 22 and 23, pending the results of marine toxin tests. For updated information, check the WDFW [Razor Clam website](#).

Best bets for winter steelhead include the Cowlitz, Lewis (including north and east fork), Kalama, Grays, Washougal, Elochoman, 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 for 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.

Anglers are also reminded that the White Salmon River has been closed to fishing until further notice since late October, when Condit Dam was breached to provide fish passage. The reopening date is not yet certain.

Hymer notes that water conditions, often highly variable at this time of year, can make a big difference when it comes to catching fish. "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, Hymer 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," he added. "It's a lot harder to catch steelhead in the peaks and troughs."

In deciding where to fish, it also helps to know how many smolts were planted in specific rivers and how many adult fish have returned to area hatcheries. In the first case, Hymer recommends

checking WDFW's [smolt-planting schedule for 2010](#). WDFW also posts [hatchery returns](#) on a weekly basis.

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 are still available, Hymer said. As he sees it, the best bet for coho is the Cowlitz River where over 30,000 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. Also on Dec. 1, 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 the mouth to the forks – All close to fishing for steelhead and salmon.
- **South Fork Toutle River** – Closes to fishing for steelhead from the 4100 Bridge upstream. Fishing remains open under selective gear rules from the mouth to the bridge.
- **North Fork Lewis River** – The night closure and anti-snagging rules are lifted from Johnson Creek to Colvin Creek. (The area from Colvin Creek upstream to the overhead powerlines below Merwin Dam reopens for hatchery steelhead and salmon Dec. 16.)
- **Cowlitz River from Mill Creek to the barrier dam** – Night closure and anti-snagging rules are lifted.
- **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 closes for game fish above Shipherd Falls.
- **Klickitat River** – Closes to fishing for trout, hatchery steelhead and salmon, except for salmon fishing from the Fisher Hill Bridge downstream, which remains open through January. The night closure remains in effect. The whitefish-only fishery opens from 400 feet upstream from #5 fishway upstream. Whitefish gear rules will be in effect.
- **Swift Reservoir** – Closes to fishing.

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

The news for **trout** anglers is that WDFW is scheduled to stock three lakes in Clark County with half-pound rainbows in early December. Lacamas Lake will receive 8,500, while Battle Ground Lake and Kline Pond will each get 5,000.

There should also be plenty of trout remaining from plants in November to provide good fishing at other lakes through the end of the year. John Weinheimer, a WDFW fish biologist stationed in Vancouver, notes that Fort Borst Pond, a juvenile-only fishing pond near Centralia, received 1,200 jumbo rainbows just before Thanksgiving, as did South Lewis County Park Pond near Toledo. Kress Lake near Kalama got 1,000, Rowland Lake near Bingen got 1,700, and Battleground Lake got 2,500. Anglers should be aware they'll need a Discover Pass to enter Battleground Lake State Park.

Weinheimer also reminds anglers they can keep up to 10 adipose clipped rainbows in Scanewa Lake (Cowlitz Falls Reservoir).

## **Eastern Washington**

The region's four winter-only **rainbow trout** lakes open to fishing Dec. 1, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) fish biologists say all should provide good open-water angling opportunities.

Southwest Spokane County's Hog Canyon Lake, 10 miles northeast of Sprague, has rainbows ranging from nine to 16 inches, according to WDFW central district fish biologist Chris Donley, who tested the waters over Thanksgiving weekend.

Donley said Fourth of July Lake, two miles south of Sprague in Lincoln County, looks better than last year.

"Most of the fish at Fourth of July will be in excess of 14 inches with some very large 22- to 24-inch fish in the mix," he said. "Fish densities are not back to where they were historically, 10 to 30 years ago, but the fishery is definitely getting better. We have a cormorant and pelican predation problem on that lake in the spring and summer that makes it difficult to get enough fish to recruit to the population to provide the kind of fishery that existed there in the past." Donley noted that both Hog Canyon and Fourth of July lakes have a daily catch limit of five trout, but only two can be over 14 inches.

The other two winter season trout lakes are in Stevens County – Hatch Lake, about five miles southeast of Colville, and Williams Lake, 14 miles north of Colville. WDFW northeast district fish biologist Bill Baker said fishing in both lakes should be good this season. The rainbows in Hatch Lake should range between 12 and 15 inches, and those in Williams Lake will be slightly smaller, 11-13 inches.

There can also be good trout fishing opportunities through the winter at several large year-round waters in the region, including Rock Lake in Whitman County, Sprague Lake on the Lincoln-Adams county line, and Waitts Lake in Stevens County. Net-pen-reared rainbows are usually a good bet, too, at Lake Roosevelt, the huge reservoir off Grand Coulee Dam.

Snake River drainage **steelheading** continues in December, after good catches in three stretches of the mainstem river. WDFW southeast district fish biologist Glen Mendel of Dayton said creel surveys in late November showed anglers fished an average of 16 to 17 hours for each fish kept in the stretch from Lower Granite Dam to the interstate bridge, from Little Goose Dam to Lower Granite Dam, and from Lower Monumental Dam to Little Goose Dam. Anglers fished an average of 26 hours for each fish kept on the lower Grand Ronde River. As winter advances and temperatures drop, anglers are reminded to be careful about ice that can hamper access on fishing waters – both ice cover on lakes and shoreline "shelf" ice on rivers and streams.

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.

### **Northcentral Washington**

Three Okanogan County lakes switch from catch-and-release fishing to catch-and-keep fishing for **rainbow trout** on Dec. 1. Big Green, Little Green, and Rat lakes all have a daily catch limit of five trout, which can be caught on bait.

Then again, Patterson Lake near Winthrop can be good for **yellow perch** during the winter, said Bob Jateff, Okanogan district fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Bait can be used year-round and there is no daily limit on perch. "In fact, anglers are encouraged to retain as many perch as possible, regardless of size, to better balance the fish populations in the lake," he said.

Jateff reminds anglers using WDFW access sites at these winter fisheries to display the WDFW vehicle use permit that came with their fishing license. Non-fishing recreationists who use the access sites for other activities need to have a Discover Pass.

In Chelan County, Fish and Roses lakes provide good fishing during December and throughout the winter, WDFW Chelan district fish biologist Travis Maitland of Wenatchee. Yellow perch and rainbow trout are the main winter targets at both lakes, which are open year-round. "Fish Lake is popular for ice fishing," Maitland said, "but until we get low enough daytime and nighttime temperatures to produce thick, safe ice, everyone should be cautious."

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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.

**Steelhead** fishing on the mainstem Columbia River usually picks up in December, as the action slows a little on the upper tributaries with advancing winter conditions. Areas to try include both above and below Wells Dam, at the mouths of the Entiat, Methow and Wenatchee rivers, and in the area across from the Eastbank Hatchery. Selective gear rules are in effect for the mainstem, although bait is allowed. There is a mandatory retention rule on adipose-fin-clipped hatchery steelhead, and a night closure.

### **Southcentral Washington**

Catch rates for **hatchery steelhead** have picked up in the Hanford Reach, but are still running a little slower than normal. Paul Hoffarth, a district fish biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), said fishing should remain productive through December as steelhead mill around waiting for the spring spawn.

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. "The fish are still out there, but fishing tends to get spotty – good one day, bad the next."

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 in years past, the catch limit is 15 fish per day, but anglers are required to use a 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 can catch **eastern brook trout** under selective gear rules. No size or daily limits are in effect for eastern brook trout, but fishing is strictly catch-and-release for all other species of trout.

In other waters, WDFW recently stocked **half-pound rainbows** in the North Elton Pond near Selah, which opens to fishing Dec. 1 with a two-fish daily limit. In addition, the department plans to stock excess rainbow trout brood weighing 3-8 pounds apiece in several other lakes by early December. Fio Rito Lake and Mattoon Lake are each scheduled to receive 125 of those lunkers, Myron Lake 100 and Rotary Lake 125. I82 Pond #4 will also get 125 big trout and Reflection Pond in Sarg Hubbard Park 40.

### **TGF Inbox - Reader E-mail**

#### **Write to the TGF staff:**

Bob Rees: [brees@pacifier.com](mailto:brees@pacifier.com)

Doug Rees: [doug@TheGuidesForecast.com](mailto:doug@TheGuidesForecast.com)

Michael Teague: [Michael@TheGuidesForecast.com](mailto:Michael@TheGuidesForecast.com)

#### **Random Links**

Winter steelhead Fly Fishing Class with John Larson:

<http://oregonflyfishingblog.com/2011/12/09/winter-steelhead-fly-fishing-class-with-john-larison/>

Beautiful British Columbia Videos:

<http://vimeo.com/17973045>

More: <http://vimeo.com/22680248>

**GOOD LUCK!**