

The Guide's Forecast - volume 13 issue number 47

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

Forecasting for the fishing week of **December 2<sup>nd</sup> – December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

**Oregon Fisheries Update:**

**Willamette Valley/Metro-** Sturgeon fishing on the mainstem Columbia remains best in the Portland to Longview stretch where boaters were averaging a keeper for every 11 boats. Far from its potential, action on the mainstem likely won't pick up again until spring time.

Impact from rainfall was evident at Willamette Falls November 24th & 25th when water levels rose and muddied. Flows have been moderating this week. Catch and release sturgeon fishing in the Portland Harbor remains very good with smelt producing the best results.

McKenzie River levels were high but dropping Tuesday this week so it should fish by the weekend.

North Santiam levels are forecast to drop into the weekend but it's too early for winters here and most summer steelhead are past their prime.

Clackamas levels are returning to normal so it should fish by the weekend. A few early winter steelhead should be around with the mouth of Eagle Creek and Eagle Creek itself providing the best opportunity. Hatchery fish will return through January to the popular tributary.

Water color is improving on the Sandy and while it's early for winter steelhead, rumors are circulating that there may be a few around.

**Northwest –** Many north coast anglers are anxious to get the next season underway; winter steelhead. December can provide some good opportunities for late run chinook however and action was good in the tidewater of the Wilson on Monday. Effort was light as a slide in the upper watershed is contributing to muddy conditions. The Wilson River bite slowed by Tuesday but fish are expected to continue to come in through the month.

Effort has been low on Tillamook Bay but may jump as river levels continue to drop. Effort will likely remain in the Ghost Hole although jetty fishing may be an option by early next week as the tide series softens. Weather is forecasted to be cold, especially on the bay but sturgeon should become more prevalent in the coming weeks. Sand shrimp will provide the best action. Crabbing may improve, especially on Netarts Bay, by early next week.

Although winter steelhead remain a rare treasure on the coast, they are due in bigger numbers in the coming weeks. Steelhead are being caught from the disabled fishing platform on the North Fork Nehalem with action likely to only improve in the coming weeks. Conditions were ideal at mid-week. The Nehalem system closed to wild coho retention yesterday. It was the only coastal system that didn't attain its harvest quota goal this year.

The Nestucca and Three Rivers should see improving catches of winter steelhead with the peak likely in the next 3 weeks. The mainstem Nestucca will be the favored option once flows drop but target the mouth of Three Rivers near Hebo for the best opportunity.

The Necanicum, Big Creek, Gnat Creek and the North Fork of the Klaskanine River produce best in higher flows which we're not likely to see for at least another week. A cold east wind is supposed to blow, making steelhead fishing a frigid experience.

Crabbing should be excellent on the lower Columbia after the weekend but expect a stiff east wind and very cold conditions.

**Southwest** – While the ocean is open to bottom fishing without depth restrictions, days when it's safe to launch become a rarity in wintertime. When boats do get out, fishing is usually excellent.

Ocean crabbing is tentatively scheduled to re-open on December 15th but only of Dungeness are in good condition.

Crabbing has slowed dramatically in Winchester and many other bays and estuaries following the recent influx of fresh water. North Umpqua steelheading did not improve as a result of the freshet.

Chinook fishing appears to have wrapped up for the season in Coos Bay and the lower Coquille.

A few winter steelhead have been taken on the lower Rogue. Early winters are often a harbinger of a good seasonal run. Chinook fishing is very slow. Steelhead and half-pounder catches on the middle Rogue have been poor to fair. With the river coming back into shape, summer steelheading has resumed in the upper river with mixed results.

Chetco is in good shape this week and is forecast to continue to drop and remain in decent condition for weekend fishing. Big chinook are available this season although none have topped the 65-pounder taken last week. Results will be good into early December although winter steelhead will also be entering in ever-greater number. Plunkers have taken winters this week although the edge will go to side-drifters as the river level drops.

As the Elk and Sixes rose and fell with recent precipitation, anglers followed. Despite crowded conditions, bright fish were taken as the river dropped into shape. Both will be low and clear by the coming weekend.

**Eastern** – Prospects are fair this week for steelhead on the Wallowa, Imnaha and Grande Ronde rivers.

The John Day Pool and John Day River itself are producing great catches of steelhead although wild fish outnumber hatchery ones. Action should continue to produce for anglers willing to brave cold winds this week.

**SW Washington** – Coho continue to come into the Cowlitz but many are turning dark and getting close to spawning. Winter steelhead are beginning to make a good show and if anglers can tolerate a cold east breeze, action should be decent by late morning.

The North Fork is starting to see some winter run activity but it is still weeks away from peak season.

The Washougal is also an option for metro anglers and should continue to produce into January.

**Columbia River Fishing Report** – As expected, sturgeon fishing on the Columbia River continues to slow. Gorge angler effort is still dropping but bank anglers fishing close to the deadline did take 3 keepers and 20 shakers for 63 rods on the weekend check. Although a boat creel survey was not available, the boaters haven't been doing as good as the bank anglers have.

Boaters working the Portland to Longview stretch are doing about as good as gorge anglers with 3 legals and 35 shakers for 32 boats. Smelt remains a key bait for anglers in this stretch and sturgeon seem to concentrate in the deeper holes this cooler time of year.

As is typically the case, that is about all that is going on in the Columbia this week with the exception of steelhead fishing in the John Day stretch. Plug trollers continue to take fish in the John Day Pool itself but the lower John Day has biting fish available as well. Wild fish outnumber hatchery fish but the action remains better than a fish per boat average. This is a quality fishery this time of year, if you can brave bitterly cold temperatures on some days.

**The Guide's Forecast** – Don't look for conditions to improve anytime soon here. As a matter of fact, if cold weather grips the region as is forecasted, the action could get even slower as the sturgeon's metabolism will likely continue to drop.

Bank anglers should focus on the deadline near Bonneville whereas boat anglers should target fish in the Portland to Longview stretch. Smelt will remain a top bait but don't overlook the benefits of mixing baits this time of year. Shrimp is always effective if you can keep the baits fishing. Combo shrimp up with smelt and you have a very effective bait. Smelt is certainly an expensive commodity with demand high and availability low. Using half a smelt per rod is not a bad option. Couple it up with shrimp and you're fishing about as effective as you can.

**Willamette, McKenzie & Santiam Rivers Fishing Report** – Flow over Willamette Falls has started to moderate but the water temperature is still hovering in the mid-40s and visibility is only about 2.5 feet. Coho continue to trickle over in single digit but winter steelhead passage picked up around mid-November and has been fairly steady since that date although the total is less than 300 so far. A meeting will take place in the next few weeks to determine when the lower Willamette will open for sturgeon retention in 2012 and for what period of time. It is anticipated the retention period will be sometime in January or February and that the window of opportunity will be only a few days in duration.

Sturgeon fishing remains excellent in the Portland Harbor. It's catch and release only season here but the action is worth the effort according to **pro guide Kevin Newell (360-430-2521)**. Kevin took out a few anglers early in the week, boating numerous fish with a few keeper sized sturgeon in the mix that were released back into the water. Smelt was the key ticket for his success as he stated shrimp can be effective but the trash fish will eat you alive some days. Kevin simply stated, "These fish are hungry, they'll eat anything you put down there for them."

The North and South Santiam river are dropping with conditions forecast to continue improving into the coming week.

McKenzie water flows have dropped to about 3,400 cfs at Vida. To put that in perspective, it was around 3,000 cfs prior to the deluge in the third week of November.

**The Guide's Forecast** – Plunkers are trying for steelhead at Meldrum Bar on the lower Willamette but efforts have mostly been in vain. While this is seldom a hot fishery, prospects will improve in weeks to come. The Coast Fork Willamette which is open to catch-and-release trout fishing should provide decent with fishing, particularly for fly rodders.

Summer steelhead are still available above Green's Bridge on the North Santiam and above Lebanon Dam on the South but most of these fish are colored up at this time of year. The North Santiam will offer a good catch-and-release wild steelhead fishery but not until well into 2012.

Fly anglers targeting late-season summer steelhead on the McKenzie are hitting fish here and there but are hooking some dandy redsides in the process. Summer steelhead taken this week have been in good condition, showing just the slightest blush of color.

**Clackamas and Sandy River Fishing Reports** – Water conditions have improved at the Clackamas River and are currently very good. River levels and flow are forecast to continue dropping until the next round of rainfall. A few winter steelhead have been caught.

Sandy water conditions are conducive to fishing. Early winter steelhead are optimistically seeking fish but with the implementation of the later-running bloodstock several years ago, it is an overly optimistic endeavor.

**The Guide's Forecast** – It's early to expect stellar results for winter steelhead on the Clack but Only a few dark coho are lingering in Eagle Creek as the water drops to low and clear in the absence of precipitation.

The ODFW has confirmed the return of a few winters to the hatchery facility on Cedar Creek but these are the exception to the rule. Expect to find worthwhile numbers in the river early next year. While there are a few coho remaining in the system, they are well past their 'catch-by' date.

**North Coast Fishing Report** – As anglers begin to turn their focus on winter steelhead, good numbers of late-run fall chinook continue to enter the system. The Wilson and Kilchis are primary targets for driftboaters and sleds utilizing the lower reaches of these systems. Following the floods of last week, rivers have finally dropped and are fishing fair to good as we write this report. On Monday, **pro guide Brandon McGavran (360-607-1327)** was fishing all alone on the lower reach, netting 2 fine chinook for 5 opportunities. The Wilson remained dirty from a slide on state forest lands in the upper reach but as most experienced anglers know, you don't need much visibility to find motivated fish. By Tuesday however, the action had dropped off and anglers river-wide were reporting sparse results.

Driftboaters working the Mills Bridge to Sollie Smith stretch were struggling for action on Tuesday with very few boats reporting catches. The fish were likely to be there and even though the conditions weren't ideal, they were certainly good enough to expect some results.

Driftboaters working other district streams haven't been so lucky. As most of the late season fish are destined for the Wilson and Kilchis Rivers, those are the two top options for chinook on the north coast. Other systems will have late season stragglers but won't provide the opportunities that these two systems will. The Trask can be another December option but you're likely to find more dark fish than bright ones this time of year. There remains a winter run of chinook on the Trask but it never really materialized into anything significant. The Nestucca can also see some late season returns but it's more of a fluke to catch a bright one this time of year.

The "late-breaking" news of Wednesday's effort supports earlier expectations of a slow Trask River but extremely crowded and a fair bite on the Wilson River. **Pro guide Chris Vertopoulos (503-349-1377)** reported going 1 for 3 on Wednesday. He started off on the Wilson and of the 3 fish he hooked, he landed a chrome bright 18-pounder and lost another bright fish near the boat. Chris stated other boats on the float were doing fair at best while Trask River fishing was extremely slow.

I haven't heard of any reports of pale cutting hens that had bright skin so far this season. This time of year, it's not uncommon to catch a chrome bright hen that cuts pale for flesh color. One guide reported most of the fish he's catching have been bucks.

Tillamook Bay itself will have another shot of interest when flows drop. There have been very few boaters trolling the Ghost Hole recently. The Ghost Hole is a poor prospect when river flows are high as chinook will be racing towards their natal streams to take advantage of the higher flows and easier access to spawning grounds. Strong tides dictate a middle bay strategy but that will change by early of next week. The Ghost Hole however did put out a flurry of fish Wednesday morning with reports of one boat tagging 3 chinook. Another avid anglers also working the Ghost Hole reported losing one with the best bite taking place towards the end of the outgoing tide (don't ask me why....).

Steelheaders are anxious to get the season underway and with Portland metro anglers put on hold from what used to be a traditional Thanksgiving kick-off for steelhead, the coast will be the place to focus.

Remember this: The Nehalem system closed to wild coho retention on November 1<sup>st</sup>. It was the only coastal system that didn't attain its harvest quota goal this year.

There hasn't been many steelhead reported from district streams but enough November fish to believe that we're going to have a decent December season over the next month. December and early January are typically the time of year for most Alsea strain steelhead. Although not the most premier of returning strains, they do provide some decent sport on several north coast streams. Look to the Forecast section for the best detail on which systems will offer the best opportunity.

One reliable fishery this time of year is the North Fork of the Nehalem and Three Rivers. Both are small streams that get a good run of these Alsea strain fish. The North Fork has reported several fresh winter steelhead taken already, mostly from the handicap dock but the stretches downstream of the deadline were also producing a few fish. Conditions were ideal at mid-week, following the floods over the weekend.

Sturgeon effort remained low on Tillamook Bay with late night tides not so ideal for sturgeon anglers. That's the drawback this time of year, the tides can be good, but they are late at night. Sturgeon often make a strong showing in Tillamook this time of year; I don't think it will be any different this year as sturgeon seem to be plentiful this season on the coast.

Crabbing should improve on the waning tide series. I crabbed on Netarts Bay on Wednesday, with sub-par results. Although I only went out for one pull of the pots, we only got 3 keepers for 9 pots. The overall total for 9 pots was 13 keepers. They were nice, full males but not what I was hoping for given the time of year.

**The Guide's Forecast** – With water levels continuing to drop, anglers will want to focus their efforts in the lower stretches of the watersheds of the north coast. The Wilson and Kilchis Rivers will remain the top bets for chinook with some steelhead also likely available. Fish will not be migrating upstream in quick order and the freshest fish will be in the lower reaches with Mills Bridge to Sollie Smith an option on the Wilson but better action likely to take place in the tidewater reach. For Kilchis anglers, leave the Kilchis Park to Logger Bridge alone and focus on the water downstream of the Logger Bridge. Plugs become more effective in the lower flows as well but smaller back-bounced baits will prove as effective. Bank anglers should find bright fish available in the deeper holes through the weekend. The Wilson should be the best bet from Siskeyville downstream and tidewater producing the best results. If water levels continue a

downward trend as forecasted, bobber fishing may once again be the method of choice for many anglers.

With lower flows expected on the north coast, the bay may become the best option in the coming week. Trolled herring on the incoming tide, (and outgoing apparently) may produce some fair catches on the east side of Tillamook Bay. High tide will be early in the morning so anglers will not have the most favorable of tides to work with. A fairly strong outgoing tide will make it difficult to fish along the jetty but a fair bite may occur close to low slack out there. Unfortunately, the best tide series will take place at night.

Following the weekend however, sturgeon tides look pretty favorable for west channel anglers. Sand shrimp should produce some results over there and the middle channel may be an option as well. With all the recent fresh water, juvenile crab may not be an issue any longer.

Crabbing should improve as the fresh water flushes out of the system. Netarts and the lower Columbia will be the best so don't expect great crabbing in many of the other estuaries.

As for steelhead, most streams will see a decline in steelhead possibilities until the next rain freshet which is not even indicated in the long-range forecasts. Like salmon fishing, the lower reaches of most rivers will produce the best results. The longer a salmon or steelhead spends in fresh water, the less likely it is to take a bait.

None-the-less, steelhead should be available on many north coast streams including the Highway 30 systems (Gnat and Big Creeks, South Fk. Klaskanine River), Necanicum and the North Fork Nehalem should be good. The Kilchis and Wilson will be Tillamook County highlights with the Nestucca downstream of Three Rivers a fair bet. Three Rivers itself should produce a few fish.

Anglers will want to drop down to low water tactics by the weekend as waters clear and fish become more skittish. Hardware may also produce some action as well. If flows get really low, bobber and jig fishing may become effective in deeper pools.

**Central & South Coast Reports** – Offshore bottom fishing has been excellent now that it's open without depth restrictions but opportunities this time of year can be a rarity. On those calm, sunny winter days, it can be off the hook, so to speak. Wind and swells are forecast to moderate into the coming week with fairly friendly offshore conditions predicted for Monday and Tuesday next week for those who are able to chase lings and rockfish on weekdays.

The wild coho fishery is underway at Tahkenitch thanks to rainfall from passing storms over the past week. Siltcoos also got a shot of fresh coho which are providing fair results for trollers using spinners or plugs.

Despite several online outdoors sites reporting that recreational ocean crabbing is open as of December 1st while commercial efforts are delayed until at least the 15th, the fact is that both are closed. The December 15th opener is contingent upon positive results from ODFW ocean crab tests. If Dungeness are not sufficiently filled out, the opener could be further delayed.

Siletz winter steelhead won't be on the radar until the first of the year. Hopefully, there will be more water in the river at that time as it is too low to fish well now.

As of December 1st the popular North Fork Alsea opened for winter steelheading. Be sure to check the regulations as parts of the river remain closed. This river is best fished from a boat but

the river level is forecast to drop below optimum for drifting by the weekend. It's early yet for best results but there are some winters in the system now.

Winchester Bay is producing limits of Dungeness despite the influx of fresh water but the crab are of mixed quality, requiring sorting of those not yet filled out with meat. Chinook fishing in the bay and lower river is about done as most of the fish have moved upriver. A few fresh winter steelhead are showing on the Umpqua River although there are a number of colorful coho in the mix. The South Umpqua opened on December 1st with winter steelhead the target for anglers although fishing won't really be worthwhile until after the first of the year, improving in February and March. North Umpqua results for summer steelhead remains slow in the flies-only section.

Crabbing has held up thanks to the deep water in Coos Bay with best results coming nearer the ocean. Winter steelhead are starting to trickle in to the Coos and Coquille system but it's too early to target them here. Confirmed winter steelhead catches have made at Nesika Park on the East Fork Millicoma.

Coquille steelheaders have caught the first winter steelhead of the season this week although they were wild and only hatchery fish may be kept here. The season has just started and will improve in weeks to come.

Lower Rogue water conditions are pretty good now and a few winter steelhead have been taken. The best is certainly yet to come as the season is just beginning. Leaves washed downstream in the recent freshet are clearing out as water clarity improves on the middle Rogue. A few summer steelhead are being taken but many are darkening. There is a significant component of large sea-run cutthroat trout available to sweeten the deal on this stretch. Steelheaders on the upper Rogue are taking a mix of wild and hatchery summer and experiencing decent action this week. There are also some late coho in the upper river but most are wild and, as with non-hatchery steelhead must be released. Most all fish in this stretch are exhibiting varying degrees of color.

Chinook will continue to enter the Chetco system but those in the know are speculating that the best of the season has past but that it will remain worthwhile in the weeks to come.

With the Elk River low and clear, the river is not fishing well, even for the hopefuls trying near the hatchery. The only fishing is at the mouth where results have been slow. Without precipitation in the forecast, it will remain poor here until the next round of rain. The smaller Sixes River, Call 541-332-0405 for the latest update on Elk River conditions. The Sixes River is the earlier of the two to recover from a freshet but is also the earlier to drop to low, clear conditions. as it is now.

**Central and Eastern Oregon** – There are a few steelhead around on the lower Deschutes but not enough to make it a real worthwhile destination. Results have been erratic and spotty. Redside fishing has been fair to good at times.

The lower John Day has been good for some, slow for others. Those using colored prawns are getting the majority of hookups although lighted plugs took fish at night over the past weekend. About one-third of the steelhead caught have been hatchery keepers.

Crescent Lake is producing large lake trout to trollers using downriggers. As usual, those with some experience with the fishery are doing best. Dress for cold weather here. See Random Links, below, for more information.

## **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.

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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. Those catch reports are due to WDFW by Feb. 1, 2012. For more information on catch record cards, visit WDFW's [catch record card webpage](#).

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.

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#### **Random Links**

Live Cam of Crescent Lake Boat Ramp:

<http://www.crescentlakeresort.com/>

Beautiful Deschutes Video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO97EE6Ldi8&feature=youtu.be>

**GOOD LUCK!**