

The Guide's Forecast - volume 13 issue number 50

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

Forecasting for the fishing week of **December 23rd – December 29th, 2011**

Oregon Fisheries Update:

Willamette Valley/Metro- Although a fresh quota will be available for mainstem Columbia sturgeon seekers, action will remain dormant until spring flows increase the water temperatures. Action may be best near the mouth of the Willamette although the Portland Harbor itself will produce the best results. Willamette River sturgeon anglers got official word that a delay in the season will put off catch and keep opportunities until February at least. Action will be fast with a very abbreviated season on a dwindling population.

Fish passage has nearly ceased at Willamette falls in low, cold water. The water is too low for productive plunking in the Meldrum Bar stretch. There is optimism regarding the 2012 spring Chinook return for which the numbers are predicted to be greater than the 2011 actual return.

McKenzie flows have dropped below 2,000 cfs at Vida which means stealth tactics for winter trout fishing,

The Santiams are low, clear, cold and slow for fishing.

Water on the Clackamas is at low levels and too clear to fish well. Eagle Creek is not generating a lot of interest although there are fish present. The mouth should be the most ideal spot to intercept these returning fish.

Similar conditions on the Sandy River have made for slow results for early broodstock winter steelhead.

Northwest – Although the peak of the winter steelhead season, river levels have curtailed effort and success. Savvy anglers are focusing efforts on the tidewater reaches of north coast systems where fish are likely stacking up in anticipation of the next rain freshet which isn't predicted until after Christmas. When the rains do come, the fishing will be excellent.

Anglers are forced to use small offerings, light gear and stealthy approaches to maximize opportunity but until fish feel more secure in higher flows, success rates will be mediocre. Larger systems such as the Wilson, Nestucca and the Trask offer up the best opportunities for wild and hatchery fish but boaters will have the best access to productive drifts where bank anglers will be constrained due to limited river access.

The North Fork Nehalem has good numbers of steelhead present and early morning anglers are scoring the best results but fish are slow to move towards the hatchery where bank anglers have their best shot at what looks to be a good return. The Necanicum River will be much the same with the tidewater stretches producing the best results.

Chinook are still an option on Tillamook Bay and the lower Wilson River. One boat posted a double on chinook in the Ghost Hole on Tuesday, landing 2 bright bucks on their first pass using herring for bait. Chinook retention closes at the end of the month and fish upstream of tidewater are likely close to spawning and should be avoided, especially if they are hens.

Sturgeon fishing is underway on Tillamook Bay and legals are falling to west channel anglers. Sand shrimp is the top bait but the peak part of the tide, low slack, happens after sunset this week. Anglers can still find success before dark however; navigate with caution however.

Crabbing will be a poor option with the extreme tide series but razor clam digging along Clatsop County Beaches should produce fair results after sunset.

Southwest – Offshore bottom fishing is great for rockfish and lingcod when ocean conditions allow boats to get out. Crabbing has been slow to fair in the ocean.

If offshore ocean forecasts remain accurate, boats will not be able to get out in the weekend to come.

Winchester Bay crabbing has been very good. North Umpqua steelheading remains slow and winter steelhead have yet to enter the low waters of the South Umpqua.

Crabbing in Coos Bay is excellent from boats or docks with Dungeness full and hard. Boats venturing offshore are taking good numbers of lingcod. Fishing for early winters has been slow on the Coos River.

Although a few winter steelhead were taken following rain last week, the Coquille slowed as water levels dropped.

Winter steelhead fishing on the lower Rogue has ground to a near standstill with low water conditions. Middle Rogue steelheading is primarily a catch-and-release affair for wild fish. The upper Rogue is pretty skinny, summer steelhead and the occasional coho continue to cooperate with anglers.

The waters of the Chetco are low and gin clear in one of the driest winters in recent history. Winter steelhead are present but catching them requires stealthy techniques similar to those implemented for low-water summers: long, light leaders and small offerings. Ocean crabbing is not legal until mid-January but good results are coming from the docks in Brookings Harbor.

The Elk and Sixes rivers are again low and clear. There are a few chinook around but many are turning dark. Wait for the next round of rainfall to try these small ocean tributaries.

Eastern – Trout fishing is spotty on the Crooked River but whitefish are plentiful and cooperative.

Crescent Lake is producing decent catches of lake trout to deep trollers.

Good numbers of bull trout are being caught at Lake Billy Chinook.

SW Washington – The Cowlitz River remains a bright spot for steelhead anglers, especially boaters working the water near the trout hatchery. Bank anglers scored nearly a fish for every 5 rods while boaters tallied nearly a keeper for every boat.

The North Fork of the Lewis boasted a steelhead for nearly every 2 bank rods last week and will likely continue to produce good results in the low water.

Trout fishing in the district has been productive lately with many lakes receiving catchable plants in mid-December.

Columbia River Fishing Report – As expected sturgeon effort and catch continue to decline with no improvement in sight until spring water temperatures rise. The Bonneville Pool may remain the best bet in the mainstem but don't count on that fishery being very strong either. The 2012 quota and catch and keep possibilities reopen on January 1st.

With continued cold weather and dropping catch rates, the John Day Pool and Arm steelhead fisheries are winding down. There are still some catches of steelhead taking place to trollers working these two bodies of water. Wild steelhead make up the bulk of the catch but some hatchery fish are still being taken.

The Guide's Forecast – No forecast is needed; we recommend that you fish somewhere else.

Willamette, McKenzie & Santiam Rivers Fishing Report – Water temperature at Willamette Falls has increased from 39 mid-month to 41 as of today, December 22nd. It's still cold and at near-summer level lows in one of the driest Decembers on record. Fish passage is insignificant.

According to a December 20th announcement from the ODFW, *"For a second straight year the traditional Jan. 1 opener for white sturgeon retention on the lower Willamette River, including Multnomah Channel and the Gilbert River, will be delayed because of an anticipated cut in the harvest quota."*

"ODFW fishery managers will consult with the Fish and Wildlife Commission at the Jan. 6 meeting regarding 2012 sturgeon management. Based on Commission guidance, dates for the retention season in the lower Willamette will be announced around mid-January."

"According to John North, ODFW Columbia River fisheries manager, when the retention season does open in February it's likely to be even shorter than the 12 day season in 2011."

On a brighter note ... never mind, there is no brighter note with regard to keeper sturgeon fishing on the lower Willamette. If this trend continues, in the near future there will be no Willamette sturgeon retention.

McKenzie level and flow have continued a slow, steady decline this week.

North Santiam River level and flow is stable and should remain so into the coming week.

If all went according to schedule this week, Huddleston Pond and Junction City Pond each received 350 pound one-pound trout.

The Guide's Forecast – The only possibility of a hookup on the lower Willamette is plunking for winter steelhead from the bank below the mouth of the Clackamas River and in these water conditions that is a long shot.

Trouting is fair on the McKenzie despite low water. Look for typical winter Blue-Winged-Olive hatches at times.

The best bet on the North Santiam is late-late summer steelheading for colorful specimens. Catches are expected to be only fair with best result upstream if Green's Bridge.

Clackamas and Sandy River Fishing Reports – No rain, no change on the Clackamas. It's

very low and clear. Eagle creek is low, clear and is running very cold. It won't fish until and unless rain falls.

Sandy Rivers are low enough to make drift-boating an ill-advised activity. The river will be low and clear through the holiday weekend.

The Guide's Forecast – While steelhead hookups on the Clackamas have been rare, those employing long, light leaders and tiny baits or lightweight bobber and jig rigs are hooking fish occasionally, but most are wild. Showers are forecast to start on Christmas day with rain following in the week to come will bring more winters in to the system.

Despite the switch to plants of only late-running broodstock steelhead on the Sandy for several years now, winters have been taken in modest number for the last several weeks. Despite marginal water conditions, the chance of a hookup here is fair. As water conditions improve and more fish enter in the New Year, results will dramatically improve.

North Coast Fishing Report – Anglers continue to await the next rain freshet and with the driest December on record, the next rain will be a welcome one and likely to provide some unprecedented steelhead opportunities on the north coast. Right now, anglers still successfully catching winter steelhead on the north coast are able to work over concentrated numbers but have to employ very stealthy techniques to get the job done.

There are steelhead inching into all north coast streams and they can be found river-wide on many systems. The problem is, the longer they remain in fresh water, the less likely they are to bite; plus, everyone wants fresh fish anyway! The lower reaches of all north coast streams offer up the best chance at fresh winter chrome and light lines and small offerings will take fish consistently for the versed angler. We'll give you a complete run-down on the north coast in the Forecast section just below.

Salmon fishers are losing interest in the last remaining stronghold on the north coast, the Tillamook district. Although action remains fair, bright fish are becoming harder to find and conditions remain best in the estuary where Christmas Chinook are still staging in preparation for the next rain freshet.

On that note, **pro guide John Kirby (406-930-1133)** reported a unprecedented double in the Ghost Hole on Tuesday. He and 2 other folks were trolling plug cut herring on this season's hot spot and hooked and landed the double buck action on their first pass. There were only a few other boats fishing and the crew only saw one other fish caught. They tried through the afternoon but no other bites. What few anglers fishing the lower Wilson reported was less than stellar. The Chinook season closes on December 31st and steelheaders will likely see chinook well into steelhead season.

Sturgeon anglers working Tillamook Bay are finally starting to see the fruits of their labor. Although still a relatively untapped fishery, keepers are providing some sport and consumptive opportunities in the west channel of Tillamook Bay. Lucky anglers using sand shrimp even stand a chance at a boat limit but be prepared for cool weather; you really can't overdress enough for this fishery. The Nehalem can often harbor keeper sturgeon in the tidewater areas this time of year too. The Barn Hole or the mouth of the North Fork can provide some opportunities for those willing to risk a day of effort.

Crabbing remains fair in several estuaries with Tillamook and Netarts top north coast favorites. I crabbed on the lower Columbia last Thursday, picking up 31 keepers for 9 pots and 3 crabbers.

The crab weren't in prime condition and the commercial pots littered the area I really wanted to crab. It will become increasingly more challenging to land limits in this fishery until effort drops off.

The Guide's Forecast – With steelhead still on the forefront of everyone's mind, anglers will be anxiously awaiting the next rain freshet that may or may not come this week. It's been the driest December on record, making the next rain the most significant event to happen to steelheaders in memory. We already know it's going to be a good run this season, we just need the river conditions to cooperate. Here's a river by river break-down on how to fish these systems now (low water) and how to fish them if we ever get that rain freshet this month. That rain freshet is expected (according to hydrograph models) just a few days after Christmas. Here's the run-down from north to south:

Highway 30 streams (Klaskanine, Big Creek, Gnat Creek)- These small streams should have steelhead staging at their mouths. Although I can't profess to study each of these systems river mouths, they are likely very similar where the extreme lower reaches are tidally influenced, deep and dark. Spinners or bobbers and bait or jigs should work well in this "frog water" although fish will remain a bit wary in the clear water. You'll have to walk quietly and camouflaged if you're a serious steelheader.

Once these rivers get their rain, all sections and all water should be fished for the moving beasts. They will make hay to the hatcheries so find soft water to intercept them in. Hidden anglers will still find the best success on these small systems but the fish will bite with much more confidence than they will under these current conditions. Bait will work best; shrimp or eggs. Private land is the lay of the land here so watch your step as landowners can get justifiably angry.

Necanicum River- One of my personal favorites, this fishery should be well underway but fish are stalled in the tidewater sections and lower reaches of this system. Like the Highway 30 streams, tidewater may be the place to target steelhead right now and a strong outgoing tide this week may see some small Kwikfish working off of the bridges of this river in downtown Seaside. Seems like an odd place to intercept fish but it can be effective. The upper reaches of tidewater, near the Bell Buoy restaurant and Seaside Golf Course, can hold fish awaiting the next rain. Bobber and bait or jigs work well here.

Once this river gets rain, it should be easy money! Fish will hold in every kind of water and should be pretty receptive to shrimp or eggs. Driftboaters have to watch for downed trees however, especially if we get wind associated with the next rain event. Bank anglers will have the best access above Klootch Creek while boaters will do best downstream of that. This river doesn't fish well for driftboats when the flows start to subside.

North Fork Nehalem – Heavily planted with hatchery steelhead, this is a signature north coast opportunity that as you will witness, most steelheaders in NW Oregon take advantage of. It should have good numbers of steelhead available in the lower reaches, just waiting for the next opportunity to utilize a rising river. Plugs fished in the tidewater section, especially on the upcoming minus tide series, should prove productive. Bobber and egg/shrimp or jig fishers should also see some opportunities if they remain persistent.

Upon the next rain, it will be flooded with hatchery fish and the closer you fish to the hatchery, the higher the concentration of fish will be. Like most systems, bait will work best but since you'll have a lot of competition, you need to bring your "A" game if you plan on meeting your expectations. Did I mention you won't be the only one there?

Mainstem Nehalem – Occasionally gets stray hatchery fish but wild fish make up the bulk of this catch. This system fishes best when other north coast streams are low and clear (i.e. NOW!) but the run typically comes a little later in the season, say, late January. There should be some fish available now however but the peak will come later in the season. With the flows low and clear however, it may be one of the better bets for bank anglers willing to work the rocky shoreline, but not too far upstream.

Even the relatively minor rain system predicted shortly after Christmas may put this larger system out of reach for most steelheaders. The problem with the bigger systems is that the more water there is, the harder it is to pass your offering by a willing steelhead.

Kilchis River- Is still likely to get some hatchery fish back to it but low, clear water conditions may have most of the fish waiting it out in tidewater right now. Unfortunately, it's not a river that has a lot of bank access and in low water, it's even hard to get a boat down. Not a great option right now and not even a great option when flows come up. The hatchery plants in this river are a fraction of what they used to be but you'll have a near-private drift if you choose to pursue fish on this majestic system.

Wilson River - One of the better north coast options, especially if you're willing to explore the tidewater reaches of this system. Steelhead should be holding in fair numbers downstream of Sollie Smith Bridge but not many steelheaders venture down there. It's harder water to fish for steelheaders as deep drifts often intimidate steelheaders that are looking for shallower, swifter water to fish in. Use bobbers and bait or jigs or side-drift with light lead but you need to know your baits are getting down in the deeper drifts. Plugs may be effective here but use heavy scent or use Bob's Bait Wraps to secure a sand shrimp or small baitfish fillet to the belly. Using this technique, you have a real chance at a late Chinook too!

If we get that rain as predicted for the 27th, it will be game on for steelhead and Chinook on the Wilson River. Both species will be hanging in the tailouts of drifts, especially in higher flows. This is where plugs such as tadpolly's or small Flatfish or Kwikfish will find biters. Target steelhead in shallower drifts however and leave no pocket un-picked using egg clusters for bait. Steelhead should be keyed into spawning chinook (and their future offspring). Please, release hens this time of year, even the ones infested with sea-lice are likely to cut pale and have loose eggs. Bright bucks should still cut nice however.

Trask River – Mostly wild fish this time of year, there should also be a few hatchery strays here and far less people fishing. Like other systems, tidewater will produce the best right now but shallower drifts will hold fish in higher flows. The upper drifts may be a bit barren of good numbers of fish but adventuresome boaters and bank anglers still stand a chance at a good fish above the hatchery. A rare winter Chinook may be in the mix.

Three Rivers/Nestucca system - Three Rivers remains too low for high expectations but anglers working the river mouth should find a few fish at Cloverdale. The bulk of the steelhead destined for Three Rivers should be downstream of Cloverdale and likely waiting pretty close to the mouth of the river. Use bait, even in these low flows for your best chance.

Although action is likely to pick up significantly in Three Rivers and downstream of its mouth on the mainstem Nestucca, the mainstem Nestucca itself won't likely see a significant improvement until later in January and late February when broodstock returns hit the river. Wild fish should make up a significant component of the catch as well this time of year. It's all a Three Rivers show in the early part of the season here and it should be a pretty good show.

Here's the hydrograph model for the Wilson River this week, plan your outing accordingly:



That's the steelhead wrap, let's look at other opportunities:

Tillamook Bay Chinook are still an option but with the more extreme tide series and a looming rain freshet, fish will not likely stay long in the estuary. Incoming tide in the Ghost Hole may still offer up some limited opportunities but don't bank on the Tillamook Bay fishery to produce many more chinook catches until next spring.

Sturgeon however should be making a good appearance into Tillamook and a lesser extent Nehalem Bays. Fish the west channel or learn the middle channel on Tillamook for your best bets. Sand shrimp will pay the best dividends and although we frequently suggest targeting low slack, we actually do our most damage about 2 hours from low slack when fish really begin to get funneled into the deeper channels that weave their way through the entire estuary. Anglers are pretty exposed in these conditions so prepare for inclement weather.

Crabbing won't be a strong option either as tides will have most keepers buried and only out and about for brief periods of time near high and low slack. You're better off clam digging; razors along Clatsop Beaches and bay clams in Tillamook or Netarts Bays. Low slack happens after dark so prepare for the harshest of conditions.

As far as offshore weather goes, it's a good time NOT to be a commercial ocean crabber:

FRI

W WIND 15 TO 20 KT WITH GUSTS TO 25 KT...EASING TO 10 TO 15 KT IN THE AFTERNOON. WIND WAVES 4 FT...SUBSIDING TO 2 FT IN THE AFTERNOON. W SWELL 12 FT. CHANCE OF RAIN.

FRI NIGHT

S WIND 5 TO 10 KT...BACKING TO SE AFTER MIDNIGHT. WIND WAVES 1 FT. W SWELL 15 FT.

SAT

S WIND 10 TO 15 KT. WIND WAVES 2 FT. W SWELL 14 FT.

SUN

SW WIND 20 TO 25 KT. WIND WAVES 5 FT. W SWELL 16 FT.

Central & South Coast Reports – Commercial crabbers have not been killing the Dungeness since the season got underway on December 15th. According to recent reports, catches have been averaging two or three crab in each pot.

Offshore swells are forecast to be building into the weekend, making ocean forays impractical. On a brighter note, conditions are predicted to improve daily as we approach the New Year.

The wild coho fishery at Tenmile Lake will close at the first of the New Year. Catches have been fair to good. Although many of the fish taken have been dark recently, persistence will yield the occasional bright ones. Pressure is surprisingly light for considering the fishing is fairly good.

Crabbing has been slow in Yaquina and Alsea bays. Boats are returning to dock with only a few crab to show for three or more hours effort.

Siuslaw crabbing is good although most are returning with numbers short of limits. Dungeness have been in excellent quality recently, full of meat and sporting rock-hard shells.

When boats have been able to cross the bar out of Reedsport, ling cod catches have been excellent in deep water offshore. Winchester Bay is producing good catches of crab with mostly limits for those trying from boats and decent numbers for dock crabbers. Fishing has held up well for those trying from the South Jetty for a mixed bag of species. Side-drifting has resulted in good numbers of winter steelhead hookups on the Umpqua near Elkton. All of the steelhead landed this week have been natives which must be released here but action has been good. North Umpqua steelheading is not worth the trip to the flies-only section. The South Umpqua, open since the 1st of December for winter steelheading, has yet to receive and fish but that will change with rain in the coming week. Here's to New Year's Steelhead!

Crabbing is worthwhile in Coos Bay as Dungeness quality improved over the past several weeks. Steelheading is slow in the mainstem, South Fork Coos, East Fork Millicoma, and West Fork Millicoma but will pick up with the next significant rainfall.

Lack of rain has the Coquille levels low and the water too clear for decent steelheading but here again, that will change with precipitation due next week.

Steelheaders on the lower Rogue are employing summer techniques to take a few winters. Half-pounders are also available around Agness. While a few summer steelhead are still available on

the middle Rogue, results are slow as cold water has resulted in lethargic fish which are slow to bite or strike. Low and slow presentation have produced the best results this week. Many summers-in-winter aficionados like the upper Rogue water conditions just fine, thank-you. Low, clear, cold water seems to work well for these guys who have - and are-catching steelhead left over from single-digit months earlier in the year. Most of these upper river hatchery steelies are pretty colorful but nothing a smoker can't make delectable. To be fair, there are those who feel the best of the upper river action is done and catches are slowing.

Challenging levels, flow and clarity will continue on the Chetco River through Christmas but long-range forecasts (weather and water) indicate that precipitation starting right after the holiday will cause a rise in the river that will continue roughly through the 39th with the water starting to drop around New Year's Eve. That sorta sounds like a fishing plan, don't it? Winter steelhead have been trickling in despite skinny conditions, rainfall will kick-start the run and steelheaders will benefit as the New Year gets underway. There is a mix of wild and hatchery winter steelhead in the Chetco currently for those who like (or don't mind) low water conditions.

Elk and Sixes conditions are unimproved in dry weather this week. Only a few dark Chinook are holed up awaiting a freshet which, if meteorological prognosticators are correct, will come late next week. Once the recover begins (and it will happen quickly in the smaller rivers) fishing is expected to be good for late-ish fall Chinook and the first strong flush of bright winters. The prime window of opportunity will be brief, however. Only a few dark Chinook are holed up awaiting a freshet which, if meteorological prognosticators are correct, will come late next week. Once the recovery begins (and it will happen quickly in the smaller rivers) fishing is expected to be good for late-ish fall Chinook and the first strong flush of bright winters. The prime window of opportunity will be brief, however.

Central and Eastern Oregon – Fishing for reddsides and browns is fair too good on the Deschutes but check the regulations for closures on certain stretches.

Trout and (mostly) whitefish are cooperating with fly anglers on the Crooked River with best results coming just below Bowman Dam.

Wallowa River steelheaders are taking fish in often-freezing conditions. The upper canyon has been productive with pressure very light.

Steelhead are available in rocky stretches of the Imnaha River although water levels are extremely low.

Despite low water conditions, excellent returns this year have finally pushed steelhead upriver and into the Grande Ronde where stealthy anglers are scoring.

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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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. 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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GOOD LUCK!