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The AK 47 Club Redux

If you fly fish for chinook all we can say is, "Welcome to the Pain Cave."

By Dana Sturn | June 2021

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Overheard somewhere along the BC Coast, July.

Guide: Any luck?

Me: Another handshake.

Guide: Steelhead?

Me: I think so.

Guide: (looking at fly): This is too big. You'll need to go smaller for steelies.

Me: Yeah, but I don't want to catch steelhead. I'm here for chinook.

Guide : What the fuck's wrong with you?

Once upon a time I decided to go fly fishing for chinook salmon. Like so many of

the other questionable decisions I've made in my life, it ended badly. It was a week of seized reels and savage beat downs.

It was exactly what I needed.

I emerged from that experience like Christian Bale from the Lazarus Pit. The next season I formed the AK47 Club, a loose group of fly-fishing masochists who revel in an annual week of getting their Asses Kicked "4 7" (for seven) days on a remote little coastal river near Terrace, British Columbia.

Every year we happily forego a potentially amazing

steelhead trip for a week of angling angst. On chinook waters we stress about everything, even the stuff we stopped worrying about on steelhead waters long ago. My steelhead buddies don't understand, so I don't bring it up much anymore. I learned the first year that announcing your intention to go chinook salmon fly fishing is like mentioning you're taking your wife to a swinger convention. Most won't understand, and trying to explain just makes things worse, so it's best not to say anything at all.

My companions on this little ordeal have always been Mike and Shirley Walsh from the UK. Mike

has chased anadromous fish from the Kalum to the Kharlovka, with Shirley joining him occasionally, and most often on this trip. A few other folks have suffered with us as well, but when a Skagit River sage named Dake Traphagen joined us a few years back we knew our team was complete.

What makes chinook so special? On the fly they are hands down the most challenging anadromous fish you can hook. "Chinook are sheer brute force," said Walsh. "Uncompromising, with speed and unpredictability that tests my ingenuity and tackle to the very limits. They are like no other freshwater species."

Traphagen agrees. "Chinook are the closest thing in fly fishing to encountering a grizzly in dense bush. They can rip your gear and ego to pieces or just ignore you all together. Either way, they leave you shaking."

Jeroen Wohe runs Skeena River Lodge in Terrace British Columbia, where he guides fly-fishers to trophy Skeena steelhead spring and fall. But he reserves a special admiration for chinook.

"Steelhead are great," he says. "They're the most popular gamefish we have in our rivers here. But chinook are, in my opinion, the pinnacle of fish. The size, power and brute mentality to survive and make it back to their spawning grounds is really something special."

And just so we're clear, when we're talking chinook here, we're not talking about the red booty looking horrors splashed all over the magazine covers like Hellboy. Those are fish that entered freshwater possibly weeks ago, and have deteriorated out of their prime. They make a nice photo opp for visiting anglers who, with all due respect, just don't get it. Those fish may share the name, but they ain't chinook. Not at all. When I'm talking chinook, I'm talking the tide-fresh, sea-liced, titanium-hued beasties. The real ass-kickers. Fish you're afraid to hook, because even a 20-pounder could spool you. I'm talking about those ones. And here's what you need to know to get them, if you don't really value your knuckles and you're up to the task.

TIMING

Okay, so you're at least a little bit interested now, right? So when should you go? "The first chinook show up in late April heading into the Kalum River," Wohe said. "The run is small, but fishing can be excellent. The big push of Skeena chinook arrives in June and tapers off in July."

You might wonder if June and July are favorable months to fish for chinook, given those are usually high water times on most

Pacific Northwest rivers. Fortunately, Wohe said that spring runoff isn't much of an issue and that it actually favors your odds of finding fish.

"You want high, cold rivers to bring in fresh fish," Wohe said. "When rivers get too low or warm the fish stay in the estuary waiting for cooler high water. So June is the best time to target these magnificent fish."

TACKLE

If you're going to chase these fish you'll have to supersize your steelhead tackle. Ten-weight rods are standard. You don't need to go long with these—I typically use 13-footers—but you need a rod with lots of power in the butt so you can really lean into these brutes.

When it comes to reels, bigger is always better. "Hooking one of these salmon is like hooking a jetboat," says Wohe. "On most steelhead reels the drag won't cut it. You need a large reel with lots of capacity and a high quality drag system."

Your drag not only slows the fish, but a seriously tight drag might be the only thing that al-



allows you to get a hook into them. Chinook have notoriously tough mouths. If you don't stick them on the take you probably won't get a second chance to set the hook. I've had so many fish take and leave the pool so fast that I've barely had time to lift the rod. If they stop—a big if—there's usually so much line out that trying to set up on them is pointless. A

strong disc drag system cranked down to Medieval is sometimes the only thing that gives you a fighting chance.

So, classic Hardys are out. I prefer big reels from Islander, Nautilus and Danielsson. These have drag systems designed for big saltwater fish, hold several hundred yards of backing and are not overkill. I clamp these

onto my 13-foot 10-weights. Cable-thick Skagit-style lines help me turn over the heavy 15 foot T-17 tips and the big flies I use. My leaders are always 20-pound Maxima Ultragreen, thick beefy nylon that gives me the strength and abrasion resistance I need when pulling hard on a big fish that's hunkered down in a swift water rock garden.

THE TUBES

Chinook eat flies of all kinds. Big or small, flashy or subdued, it doesn't really matter when they arrive on the tide. Chinook eat flies because they can. They can do anything they want. These badass fish have gone toe-to-toe with killer whales and prevailed. So once they reach freshwater they crash around campus like Brett Kavanaugh on reading break. They're the salmonid equivalent of the Honey Badger, or Trump after the Mueller report. They just don't give a shit. Your goofy fly is just in the way, so they kill it.

Speaking of goofy flies, I only use tubes for anadromous fish. Nothing else. My interest in tube flies started years ago, back on the Thompson River, when we started using larger and larger flies for steelhead, especially early in the morning. I ended up tying patterns on the longest hooks I could find, and lost a lot of fish due to them either bending out, or popping out due to the leverage caused by the long shank. Tube flies allowed me to use any size fly I wanted, but with a short shank heavy wire hook. When I

switched to tubes, my hooking to landing ratio skyrocketed, and I've been a devotee ever since.

My friends Mike and Dake also use tubes for steelhead, for the same reasons. And I think this is especially important with chinook if you are planning to release them. I know some anglers who tie on very large heavy wire hooks—5/0, sometimes bigger—but they are planning to bonk their fish. I release all mine, so the smaller short-shank hooks make the most sense to me.

Chinook don't seem too fussy when it comes to fly patterns. These days I commonly use a dark green tube with a black collar. Some folks go with purple, some chartreuse, while others prefer shiny rainbow hued patterns, especially near the salt. Over the years I've found the most reliable pattern to be the black over blue flies that are common these days with sink-tip steelheaders. Tie up a dozen of these, and toss a bag of 1/0 Owner SSWs in with them and you're good for a week.

PRESENTATION

If you've fished for winter steel-

head you'll have any easy transition to chinook. Cast, mend, take a couple of steps, and hang on. I usually angle my cast 60 degrees to the flow, and finish my mend with a high rod position, so I can drop the tip to allow the fly to get deep. You'll often (but not always) find chinook in faster water than you'd expect for steelhead, so you have to work to sink your fly. With a heavy sink-tip, a couple of downstream steps and then lowering your rod tip usually does the trick. Once I've made my initial mend I usually just let the fly come around. I rarely mend after the fly is swinging.

For years I experimented with various chinook hooking strategies. Despite my efforts, my landing success was rarely more than perhaps 30-40 percent. After trying literally everything to ensure solid hookups, now I just let the fish eat, which is exactly what I've always done with steelhead. This seems to be the best approach, and puts more fish on the beach for me than anything else I've tried.

To illustrate, in June of 2019 I was working my way down a big run when the head



guide called me on the radio:

Guide: “Dana, how’s it going up there?”

Me: Good. I just started in at the...oh wait a sec, I think I’m getting a bite.”

Guide” “Seriously?”

Me: “I think so. Yep, there it is again.”

[Pause]

Guide: “You’re getting a

take right now? Do you need me to come up there?”

Me: “No, I think I’m ok. Oh wait he’s on! I gotta go, he’s on!”

Throughout this little adventure I had the walkie-talkie in one hand and my rod in the other, and I didn’t lift until the second “he’s on!” You can find an excellent online video discussing

this approach (minus the walkie-talkies) by Googling “How to Set the Hook While Swinging OPST.”

Pro Tip: If you’re swinging for chinook don’t tuck the rod under your arm while you grab, they usually go, so you better have a good grip on the rod, otherwise the hours—maybe

days—you’ve invested in all this are lost, not to mention the possible loss of that fancy reel and expensive two-hander.

A Chinook by any other name

During the requisite boozy first evening at Chinook Camp, the conversation can get lively, espe-

cially with my American buddies present. They often call these fish “kings” for some reason, which has never made any sense to me, given that their forefathers kicked out the British Monarchy a couple hundred years ago. It’s almost as if they didn’t like them, which is clearly not the case.

“Where I grew up in Alaska—where we know a thing

or two about salmon—they’re kings. That’s it.” This from my friend Greg, a long lost, slightly younger “brother.”

“Dude,” I said, because I talk like Jeff Spicoli in Chinook Camp for reasons I’ve never been able to explain, “Kings are those dark, snaggle-toothed things, man. These are different creatures.”



Greg: “Tell you what, dude—you can go and swing for chinook. I’ll fish for the kings.”

Well, you can probably guess how this ends, but it’s still fun to tell.

Greg did catch a few kings—small ones, more like princes—and lots of steelhead, although if I have to admit, he did pick my pocket on the first day when he hot-footed me down a run I should have fished more thoroughly. Meanwhile, Big Fish Mike, Dake and me were either busting off big ones or getting spooled. And every now and then 25- to 30-pounders were coming to hand. Greg—who among other talents is an excellent photographer—would hover around us, camera in hand, while we suffered our beatdowns.

“See Greg,” I managed one afternoon while rolling back into the guide boat to chase another runaway downriver, “These are chinook, that fish bent out my hook after an hour, just to make the point.”

“Man, I really wanted to see that fish!” Greg said later, raising his voice above the rattle and clank of the old F-250 that

was our gravel two-track taxi back to the lodge.

I looked at him.

He said emphatically, “That ‘chinook!’ The one that bent you out! I really wanted to see him!”

And with that change in lingo, the river goddess must have been appeased, for the next day Greg started hooking real ones.

One time, halfway down the Ross Island run, I caught up with Greg, who looked rather grim and was tight to something big. I opened my flask and handed it to him.

“Better now?” I asked, as he handed it back.

“Yep. There’s no nookie like chinookie,” he said, just as his reel started spinning again.

You don’t really ever beat a chinook salmon. They just decide to break you off or let you hang out with them in the shallows for a while. If you’re lucky enough to tail one they look at you with menace, like they’re plotting your destruction. There’s not an ounce of fear in their eyes. You are clearly not in control, and never really have been. The

whole experience is intimidating.

Sound tough? It is. Hyperbole it’s not. Joining the AK47 Club is for those who reach a place where the only climb worth taking is one without the rope. It’s a strange little place where success and failure look almost exactly the same. Where one week can take it all from you. And one fish can be the answer to why you started fly fishing in the first place.

If you decide to take that plunge, all I can say is, “Welcome to the Pain Cave.”

Skeena River Chinook Salmon

When: June and July

Where: Terrace, British Columbia, on the Skeena and Kalum rivers.

Average size: These wild chinook salmon range between 15 and 60 pounds, the larger end being nearly unlandable on fly gear. But it’s fun trying! These fish can approach 100 pounds but don’t expect to hook a fish like that, let alone try to land it, on your fly gear. Forty-pounders, however, are possible on any given cast.

Gear: Bring your stout nine and 10-weight spey rods and a large arbor fly reel that holds mega backing. Sink tips are needed to reach these fish in heavy flows.

Booking: GFFI books clients at two great lodges, Skeena River Lodge and Skeena Spey Riverside Wilderness & Lodge. Both operations offer great accommodations,

excellent fishing programs, and their dedicated guides know where to find fish on the massive Skeena and the more manageable Kalum.

Contact GFFI for open dates, specials and other info. +1 (888) 304-4334

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By Dana Sturn | April 2021



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