

## Sockeye salmon run sets record for Columbia River

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Although there are 100 or so stragglers every day and it will only be "official" in a week or so, the run of sockeye salmon up the Columbia River this summer is the highest since Bonneville Dam started operating in 1938.

A story in The Oregonian four weeks ago detailed the remarkable comeback of the little-understood Columbia River run. Since then the count over Bonneville has grown by 55,000 more fish to 386,071, although counts there are tapering off to just 100 or so a day.

About 250 miles upstream, the sockeye count over Priest Rapids Dam is more than 350,000. That is significant because Priest Rapids is the first Columbia River dam past the Snake River and means hundreds of thousands of sockeye are headed to rivers and spawning lakes in north central Washington and British Columbia.

**The fish:** The sockeye is the smallest (3-5 pounds) fish of the six salmon or steelhead runs in the Columbia and considered the most flavorful for eating. It also travels the fastest, the farthest (nearly 900 miles to central Idaho) and to the highest elevation (6,500 feet to the Stanley Basin in central Idaho.) Sockeye is plentiful in parts of Alaska and Canada, and Puget Sound has several runs. But the Columbia River is the farthest south of its range.

**Background:** Before dams were built on the Columbia and Snake rivers, the sockeye run is estimated to have been 3 million a year. The count at Bonneville dwindled to 9,500 in 1945 and 8,774 in 1995. In 1991 the federal government declared the Snake River sockeye an endangered species, demanding that dam operators and fishery agencies take steps to save

it and to enhance the Columbia River run. The Columbia enjoyed strong runs in 2008 (213,600 sockeye) and 2009 (177,800). Although dam operations have improved and court-ordered springtime spills over the dams have helped, biologists who studied Columbia River sockeye say the biggest factor in the strength of the run is favorable ocean conditions the past two years.

**Big news in Idaho:** The biggest developments lately have been in Idaho. In 1990, the year before it was listed as endangered, no sockeye made it to Lower Granite Dam, the fourth and highest dam on the Snake River. The 10-year average is 81 returning sockeye; last year a record 1,219 sockeye reached the dam. That record will be broken this year. As of last week 1,925 sockeye had reached the dam, with 10 to 20 more arriving each day. In addition, the Idaho Department of Fish and Wildlife has purchased for \$4.75 million a former trout hatchery near Springfield, Idaho, with plans to convert it within two years to a state-of-the-art sockeye broodstock facility. Once operating, the goal would be to release 1 million juvenile sockeye in the Stanley Basin, where they would begin a 900-mile trip to the ocean. A release of 1 million could bring annual returns of 5,000 to 10,000.

**In Washington:** The big sockeye return has resulted in fishing seasons in the upper Columbia River above Priest Rapids Dam as well as in the Okanogan and Similkameen rivers in north central Washington. As for the Lake Wenatchee segment of the run, the determination to allow fishing -- there was a short season in 2008 -- will occur when biologists are assured that they will have 23,000 reach the lake to spawn.

-- Quinton Smith