

Sockeye streaming up Columbia at record pace

Count of 353,000 and growing tops 1947 mark



DAVE OLSON

Sockeye are the smallest of Columbia River salmon

By Allen Thomas, Columbian staff writer

July 8, 2010

Sockeye salmon have returned to the Columbia River in record numbers this summer, more than tripling the forecast of state and tribal biologists.

The count through Tuesday at Bonneville Dam was more than 353,000 sockeye. The old record — a combination of the Bonneville count and lower Columbia commercial catch — was 335,300 in 1947.

The final tally could be 375,000 or more.

Cindy LeFleur, Columbia River policy coordinator for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said it is too early to say why the sockeye return is a record high.

The sockeye are headed for the Wenatchee and Okanogan rivers, with a tiny percentage of the salmon headed for the upper Snake River.

The vast majority of this year's record return is destined for the Okanogan, she said.

Cowlitz sockeye one determined fish

SALKUM — Sockeye occasionally stray into the Cowlitz River, although no run exists in the watershed.

There's one very persistent sockeye in the Cowlitz this year.

The fish first returned to Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery in mid-June. It was marked and recycled to the Massey Bar boat ramp on June 21. It came back to the hatchery on June 23, taken downstream again, and returned on June 25, only to be recycled downstream yet again.

It returned July 1 for a fourth time. It's reward was to be recycled a fourth time to Massey Bar ramp.

“There’s something good going on in the Okanogan to help these fish,” LeFleur said.

Sockeye are the smallest of Columbia River salmon, averaging 3 to 5 pounds, but are considered as excellent a table treat as spring chinook. Kokanee, a popular sport species, are landlocked sockeye.

Sockeye are caught incidentally by sportsmen fishing for salmon and steelhead, but do not bite well.

An estimated 135 sockeye have been kept and 1,025 released from 36,954 angler trips for chinook and steelhead between June 16 and Monday. Sockeye did not become legal for sportsmen to keep until June 26.

Under the 2008-2017 Columbia River management agreement, non-Indian harvest of sockeye is limited to 1 percent of the run. The treaty tribes are allowed a 7 percent or higher harvest rate at runs this large.

Washington and Oregon have not scheduled a commercial fishery for sockeye in the lower Columbia River. The net fleet has caught its allocation of summer chinook, and would exceed its chinook share while fishing for sockeye.

State, tribal and federal biologists initially predicted a run of 125,000 sockeye to the Columbia River. More than 200,000 sockeye were counted between June 20 and 27 alone.