

2003 SALMON REPORT RESULTS

by Jack Long (Skip Jack)

A number of years ago the salmon report coupon program was pioneered. The intent of the program was two-fold. It would give salmon anglers a weekly update on salmon activity, fishing depths, "hot" locations and presentations that were working best at the time. The other benefit of the program was an annual summary of the salmon activity. The report coupons are made available at bait and tackle shops and anglers are encouraged to pick them up, complete one for each salmon caught and mail them in. Each week the coupon results are compiled into a report and this report is broadcast Thursday, Friday and Saturday on **KFYR 550 AM Stereo Radio**. 2003 sponsors of the program were **Moritz Sport and Marine**, Mandan; **KFYR 550 AM Stereo Radio**, Bismarck; **Gibbons Fiberglass & Aluminum Boat Repair**, Bismarck; and **Dakota Tackle Inc.**, Bismarck. A special thank you to **KFYR 550 AM Stereo Radio** for their continued support of the project. Their support over the years has greatly benefited salmon anglers in their pursuit of salmon.

As an encouragement to anglers to submit coupons, weekly prize packages and two major prizes were given away this past year. The major prizes are awarded at mid-season and at the season's end. In each case, the drawing is from all coupons submitted prior to the date of the drawing. The mid-season drawing winners was **Larry Freed** of Bismarck. Larry won a **Okuma Classic 300 L Salmon Reel**. The season end prize was won by **Floyd Fischer** of Bismarck. Floyd won a **Okuma Classic 300 L Salmon Reel, an 8ft. Shimano Rod, 100 feet of 20 lb line and a "25 Long A Bomber" Lure**. The mid and season end prizes were donated by **Wade Anderson and Dakota Tackle Inc.** of Bismarck. The weekly prize packages winners are selected from those coupons turned in for that week. The packages are a combination of lures and attractors and were donated by **Rhys Davis Ltd.** maker of the **Teaser** and **Anchovy Special** lures, **O'Ki Tackle** maker of the **Big and Lil Shooter** flasher, **Silver Strike Distributing** of Bismarck, **Stinger Spoons and Sidekick Attractors**, **Scott's Bait and Tackle** of Pick City, and **Captain Kit's Marina located in the Lake Sakakawea State Park**. Weekly prize winners in 2003 included: Jon Mitzel, Todd Sando, Bob Gregoire (twice). Derwin Mann (twice), Kathy Modin, Marlin Schick, Pat Fridgen, Barb Fischer, and Floyd Fischer, all of Bismarck; Joey Veer, Coon Rapids, MN; Wayne Schmitz (twice), Minot; Leah Merdoff, Fargo; Craig Engel, Grand Forks; and Rose Becher, Mandan.

Through the summer 412 report coupons were submitted. The leading lure for the summer was cutbait at 163 followed by the squish or needlefish with 109 and the squid at 95. These three lures caught 89% of the salmon reported caught. Four main colors caught 80% of the fish. They were, in order, blue, white, green, and pink. The flasher was again the leading attractor and the favorite color was blue. After taking a year off, blue returned as the favorite flasher color. This is the fifteenth year that I have compiled this report and blue has been the favorite for fourteen of those years. The salmon weighed a total of 2,115 pounds or about a 5.5 pound average for the season. For the summer, the average lure depth was 78 feet and the lure was fished over an average of 108 feet of water. 149 salmon were picked up between 9am and noon, 118 between noon and 3pm and 57 between 6am and 9am. Five areas produced 91% of the salmon.

Deadman's Bay led the way producing 140 fish and was followed by Pochant Bay, Government Bay, the Riverdale Bluffs, and the face of the dam..

The season started very slow, if measured by the number of coupons turned in. In May four were submitted, June saw eight turned in and even July only had 31 coupons submitted. Obviously the salmon fishing was better than that during those three months but for some reason anglers didn't take the time to fill out the coupons and turn them in. But because of the low number of coupons submitted, I decided to combine the results of the three months rather than report each month separately. May, June, and July saw a total of only 43 report coupons being filled out and sent in. Government Bay was the leading location for catching salmon. Fifteen salmon were caught on squids. White at seventeen was the favorite lure color and seventeen salmon were caught between 9am and noon. The blue flasher was the preferred attractor of fourteen salmon, The fish averaged 4.3 pounds and were caught 60 feet down in 85 feet of water.

August, as in every year before, saw a definite change in angling success. In all, 314 coupons were submitted in August. Deadman's Bay accounted for 119 of the salmon caught in August, followed by Pochant Bay (83), Government Bay (54) and the Riverdale Bluffs with (35). The prime time of the day to fish was 9am to noon (113), followed by noon to 3pm (89), and 6am to 9am (51). Three main lure presentations were key to August fishing. Cutbait led the way with 122, followed by the squish or needlefish at 97 and a squid at 72. Lure color was spread out primarily between four choices. Those top four were: blue (95), white (64), green (62), and pink (42). A blue flasher (104) led the way. The average fish size was 5.6 pounds and the average depths were 80 over 111 feet.

During September 55 report coupons were sent in. Deadman's Bay was the best producer with 15 fish. Cutbait caught 33 of the 55 salmon. Green at 13 was the favorite color of the salmon, followed by white (10) and blue (9). From 9am until noon (19) salmon were netted while noon to 3pm accounted for (15) salmon. Twenty five salmon were caught without the use of an attractor in front of the lure and a silver flasher led the attractor charge. The average September salmon weighed 5.4 pounds. The September salmon were caught at an average lure depth of 78 over 105 feet of water.

As a quick review of the season, in May, June, and July a 4.3 pound salmon could be caught at Government Bay on a white squid pulled behind a blue flasher. You had to be fishing between 9am and noon at 60 feet down in 85 feet of water to catch that salmon.

As we moved into August you could catch a 5.6 pound salmon at Deadman's Bay between 9am and noon. You had to be using a cutbait in a blue hood behind a blue flasher. Finally fish that cutbait 80 feet down over 111 feet of water.

September found that you again needed to boat north to Deadman's Bay as it was the hot place to be. Fishing there between 9am and noon with cutbait in a green hood and no flasher would get

you a 5.4 pound salmon. By the way, that salmon came at 78 feet over 105 feet of water. I know that this sounds like a broken record but as data is compared going back to 1989 for the months of August and September, the prime salmon fishing months for many anglers, it is discouraging to look at last year's numbers. In 1989 the average size fish reported for the year was 6.0 pounds. 1990 saw this dip slightly to 5.8 pounds and then it spiraled downward to an all time low of 4.3 pounds in 1991, the same year we saw Lake Sakakawea experience a record low of 1815.0 feet in May. For the next three years the salmon weight fluctuated between 4.4 and 4.6 pounds. This, in all likelihood, was the result of the massive smelt die-off the Lake experienced due to the loss of the cold water habitat. 1995 saw a reversal of the trend and because we saw a refilling of the reservoir and a return of the smelt, our average weight made almost a one pound increase in one year from 4.4 to 5.3 pounds. The good days returned and the annual weights continued to increase and finally peaked at a 10.0 pound average in the year 2000. But unfortunately as we have seen a return of diminishing water levels on Lake Sakakawea, the average catch weights are also diminishing. From 2000 to 2001 we saw a drop of over two pounds and from 2001 to 2002 another drop of a pound and a half and from 2002 to last year saw a one pound drop. The 2000 peak of 10.0 pounds has shrunk to 5.6 pounds in 2003. That's a reduction of almost one half in just three years. Also the number of salmon report cards submitted has fallen off to numbers reflective of the low water years of 1991 to 1994. Finally the most revealing indicator of the effect of lake levels as they relate to salmon development is the size of the fish caught. In year 2000, 78% of the salmon caught weighed eight or more pounds. As the lake level dropped so did the salmon size. 2001 saw only 53% of the salmon weighing eight or more pounds. In 2002 it was 21% and that percentage dropped from 78% in 2000 to just 10% in 2003. Coincidence - **I don't think so**. Much has been said about the politics of a balanced water control program on the Missouri River reservoirs so I won't spend time campaigning here. But doing everything possible to preserve this splendid fishery, not only the salmon but the walleyes, northerns, and smallmouths too, is now critical. Whether it's lawsuits, conservation, shortened barge seasons or other common sense approaches, it's time for the Corps to take note and just do the right thing - not what's politically best for them.

As I am compiling this report a new record low of 1814.3 feet has been set for the Lake and it will no doubt continue to drop. This eclipsed the previous low of 1815.0 feet set in May of 1991. So I dug back through my files to see what worked during the summer of 1991. Just maybe we can put some of this information to work for us before we hit the water this summer. To help you out, here are those results.

During May of 1991 a blue crankbait pulled at a dept of 12 feet over 36 feet of water in the Steinke Bay area would catch you a 3.2 pound fish if you were fishing between 9am and noon.

Early June fishing activity was most productive in the Beulah-Hazen area. As the weather and the water warmed, fish started to be taken along the face of the dam and along the Riverdale Bluffs. You could increase your chances by pulling a blue squish (needlefish) behind a blue flasher at a lure depth of 40 feet over 71 feet of water. The best time of the day was the usual 9am to noon period and chances are your salmon would weigh 3.8 pounds.

July was the least productive month of the summer of 1991, but for those who put time in on the water there were fish to be caught. Again a blue squish (needlefish) with a blue flasher was still the set-up of choice but the salmon continued their move deeper with a lure depth of 67 feet over 96 feet the story for success. Fishing between 9am and noon would catch you a 3.3 pound salmon if you were somewhere between the face of the dam and Deadman's Bay.

August saw the return of the salmon to the lower Lake area. Fish were abundant and Deadman's Bay to the spillway was the best area to pick up a 5.1 pound salmon in. In 1991 the best producing lure was the cutbait and it could be pulled with or without an attractor. However if you chose to pull a flasher, make it the standard blue and fish were being caught at 86 feet over 119 feet of water. As it had been all summer the best time to fish was between 9am and noon.

Finally in September of 1991 we switched over to a pink full bodied squid and we attached it to a blue flasher. The average 4.7 pound fish would be caught at 83 feet over 111 feet between 9am and noon and at Pochant Bay.

While 1991's pattern won't necessarily guarantee you fish, it certainly is a starting place for low water fishing patterns. Have fun, watch for tagged salmon, turn in the heads of tagged salmon to the Game and Fish, enjoy the time outdoors, after all fishing is always great, it's just the catching that sometimes gets frustrating and as in the past, thank you to all who took the time to fill out and send in the coupons and continue to send them in 2004.

Skip Jack