

Dave Graybill

The Fishin' Magician

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What a great week for the opening of the season for summer-run and sockeye salmon. The weather has been great and conditions below Wanapum Dam were the best I have ever seen for trolling. Summer-runs and sockeye returns have been much higher than predicated. I had a great opening day, and we are in for some great fishing this summer. I also got a tour of the fish passage methods at both Wanapum and Priest Rapids dams.

It has been a tradition that I spend most opening days of salmon season with Shane Magnuson. We have fished with a variety of family and friends and this year it was a real family affair. On board was Shane's bride to be, Audrey Kelley and her Mom Angela and Dad Kyle. Instead of starting the season at Wanapum Dam Magnuson chose to launch at Beebe Park and fish the Chelan Falls area.

There were a ton of boats on the water here, and although the river was running hard, fishing was pretty good. We got off to a slow start, which was fine with everyone as we had time to enjoy a breakfast of biscuits and gravy, prepared right on the boat! After Magnuson made some minor adjustments to our Super Bait Plug Cut leaders, we immediately began catching fish. We all landed kings and they were all keepers. Not an unclipped fish in the bunch. Most of the fish were bright 10- to 12-pounders, and I got one that was bigger. Most of the fish hit the mini Plug Cut.

We then ran up to Wells Dam to see if we could get some sockeye. When we arrived we saw very few boats here. The gates were open on the dam and it was very rough. Even the big eddy across from the launch was full of big, rolling waves. We put out the sockeye gear anyway



and actually hooked and landed a few sockeye. Magnuson was using the standard dodger and hoochie rigs. We lost a few sockeye, too, which isn't unusual, but I think the rough water contributed to this.

We pulled the boat out in early afternoon and decided to take our fish to Hooked on Toy and weigh them in for the derby they have every opening day. My fish weighed 17 pounds, 9 ounces and wound up placing fourth. I won a gift certificate at the Olive Garden, that I will use this to take Shane and Audrey to dinner. After all, he put me on the fish and Audrey served me the biscuits and gravy.

On Wednesday, I traveled to Wanapum Dam, not to fish but to take a tour of the fish ladder alterations that Grant County PUD had made. As you may be aware, the water levels have been dropped to take pressure off the face of the dam when a fracture was discovered earlier this year.

This made up stream passage of salmon and steelhead impossible with the current structure of the ladder. Not the intake. Fish could enter the ladder but there was a drop of over 20 feet to water now. PUD engineers designed and constructed a new outlet to the ladder, and also had to install pumps to fill the top end of the reservoir so fish could reach the new structure. They were under a severe deadline, too, as spring salmon were on their way. Using a trap and haul method for getting early-arriving spring salmon over Wanapum, they got the structure in place before the bulk of the run reached the dam. We had a great spring salmon season on the Icicle and Wenatchee rivers this year, so the new fish ladder did its job.

Now there are thousands of summer-run salmon and potentially an all-time record number of sockeye salmon moving up the Columbia to our region. I was able to observe both summer-runs and sockeye using the new ladder. Over 14,000 sockeye passed through it in one day so far. Up stream, Chelan County PUD has extended it ladder at Rock Island Dam, and salmon are making their way past Wanapum and Rock Island dams just fine.

The other challenge that Grant County PUD has been addressing at both Wanapum and Priest Rapids Dam is down stream passage of young salmon and steelhead. There has been a structure in place for a few years at Wanapum, which some refer to as the "water slide", which is a large chute that fish can use to reach the water below the dam. This often sets up a large plume as the flow from the chute hits the water below the dam. The collision of this water has been carefully calculated to reduce the gasses that occur that can be very harmful to young fish. The design has made it possible to achieve 98 percent survival of young

salmon and steelhead moving down stream. Just completed on April 1st at Priest Rapids dam is a new gate system for down stream passage. Young salmon and steelhead use the top twenty feet of the water column when swimming down river, and this gate system allows the young fish to pass over the dam rather than under the other spillway gates. There are three such gates at Priest Rapids. Grant County PUD has invested tens of millions of dollars in fish passage between the two dams, and it looks like they are meeting their goals for fish survival. Work is still on going. The repair to Wanapum Dam is scheduled to be complete some time in the first quarter of next year. When that has been tested and deemed safe, then the finishing touches can be made on the fish ladder at this facility.

Families with children ages 14 and under will be happy to learn that the Acclimation Pond on Blackbird Island in Leavenworth is open to fishing now. This is a juveniles-only pond, and there is a five fish limit. The pond has a good population of small rainbow, and was recently planted with cutthroat. There is good bank access from the trail on Blackbird Island that can be reached via the park on Enchantment Parkway.

I have big plans for the coming week. I hope to try Fish Lake for perch, Banks Lake for smallmouth bass and the Columbia for kings and sockeye. I am going to try to do them all, and maybe some fly fishing, too!

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