

King Salmon — Aamasuuk, Iiliksak

AAMASUUT CUKLLIULUTENG TAITAARTUT UGNERKAMI. – KING SALMON ARE THE FIRST TO COME IN THE SPRING.



Photo: Sven Haakanson, Sr. with a king salmon.
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King salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), also known as chinook, are one of five varieties of Pacific salmon that spawn in the Kodiak region. They are the first salmon to arrive in the archipelago each year, heralding the beginning of the salmon fishing season. Kings may be present in ocean waters by mid-March, but don't usually enter streams until mid-June. According to Alutiiq lore, the first fish captured each year had to be eaten completely, with the exception of its gills and gallbladder. This showed reverence for the animal and ensured an abundant future supply of fish.

The largest of the Pacific salmon, kings require streams with a lake at their headwaters for spawning. Although they have been introduced to some streams, they are only indigenous to the Karluk and Ayakulik rivers, both on southwestern Kodiak Island. Fish headed for these streams migrate through Shelikof Strait, with peak returns in late June. Given their very limited distribution, kings are the least abundant of Kodiak's salmon. Only about 13,500 of these fish return to the archipelago's streams each year.

The large size of king salmon and their rich, oily meat make them a highly coveted wild food. However, this delicious fish was thought to interfere with the effectiveness of some plant medicines, so an Alutiiq healer might advise her patient not to eat king salmon while being treated with herbal remedies.