Pacific Pink Salmon (***Oncorhynchus gorbuscha***) advisory note - 2019 update

Introduction

The purpose of this advice note is to ensure:

1. That all fishery stakeholders, including fishery managers, anglers and netsmen, are alert to the possibility of the return of pink salmon to English rivers during 2019.
2. To ensure that fishery managers, anglers and netsmen know what to do should pink salmon be observed or captured in England.

Pacific Pink Salmon in spawning condition

Illustration by Timothy Knepp - U.S Fish and Wildlife Service

Background

Pacific pink salmon were originally introduced into a number of Russian rivers in the 1960s and have slowly spread westwards subsequently colonising a number of rivers in northern Norway.

In 2017, unprecedented numbers of pink salmon were recorded in UK and other European rivers. These fish are believed to have “strayed” from rivers in northern Norway and Russia. The unusually high numbers of pink salmon observed in 2017 are thought to have originated from a particularly strong year class with good marine survival.

Pink salmon spawn at a different time of year to Atlantic salmon (end of July through to mid-October), usually on the main river channel in the lower reaches of rivers although they have been observed in upstream tributaries. Juveniles hatch within 3 to 4 months and then quickly migrate to sea limiting their potential interaction with native salmonid species.

Pink salmon have a distinct two year life cycle and stocks of can be distinguished by their year of return. Some stocks return in “even” years and others return in “odd” years. Russian and Norwegian pink salmon are derived from “odd-year” stocks and it is therefore possible that they will occur again in English rivers in 2019.

What did we learn from the pink salmon invasion in 2017.

It was previously thought that the environmental conditions present in UK rivers would not be favourable for colonisation by pacific pink salmon. However, in 2017, important information was gathered about the viability of these fish to reproduce in a number of Scottish rivers.

Monitoring found that the eggs removed from pink salmon spawning areas were viable and subsequently hatched into juvenile pink salmon. We therefore need to remain alert to the possibility that a viable population of pink salmon could become established in English rivers.

In 2017, many pink salmon were reported from the licensed salmon drift nets fishery operating off the Northumbrian coast in north east England. Furthermore, 7 pink salmon were subsequently recorded by anglers in or close to English rivers (River Wear (2) Tyne (1), Coquet (1), River Hull system (1), Hampshire Avon (1), Frome (1) and from the mouth of the Solway estuary (1). It is likely that others went undetected although no pink salmon spawning activity was observed in English rivers in 2017. From the specimens that were captured and recovered by the Environment Agency, no notable disease or novel parasites were detected. However, we need to remain vigilant and continue to investigate the possible risk of undesirable consequences arising from the presence of this species.

Latest update on the pink salmon situation in 2019.

In 2019 to date, there have been 7 recorded incidences of pink salmon across the UK and the Republic of Ireland (1 in Ireland, 1 in Wales, 3 in Scotland and 2 in a T-net set off the Northumbrian coast). It is anticipated that more pink salmon will be observed over the coming weeks and fisheries managers, anglers and netsmen are requested to remain vigilant particularly if fishing in the lower reaches of our river systems.

Fisheries management organisations across the UK are sharing advice to ensure that any appearance of pink salmon in England can be monitored and managed appropriately. This will include ongoing advice to stakeholders, awareness raising and liaison with other UK and international fishery managers to exchange information on any new situation.

What should you do if you see or capture a Pacific pink salmon?

Pacific pink salmon are usually clearly identifiable from Atlantic salmon particularly when mature and in spawning condition – Please see **Annex 1**.

If you hold a salmon rod or net fishing licence and you are confident that you have caught a pacific pink salmon, the fish should be humanely despatched and retained. Please do not return the fish to the river.

This guidance also applies to rivers with mandatory catch and release for Atlantic salmon or trout and coarse rod licence holders. In either instance, it is important that if retaining a pink salmon, please call the Agency immediately on **0800 80 70 60** to report the capture and retention of this fish. The capture will then be formally logged. If it is not possible to make this call the fish should be released back to the river alive.

If you have retained or found a fresh, dead pink salmon, please immediately contact the Environment Agency through the contact details provided at the end of this note.

In recording the capture of a pink salmon, please collect and report the following details:

- **date of capture or sighting,**
- **location of capture (grid reference if possible) and details of the site,**
- **method of capture,**
- **sex of fish.**

If possible, please also:

- **take a photograph of the fish,**
- **obtain a scale sample from the captured fish and store these in a paper envelope,**
- **freeze and store the fish whole as soon as possible after capture,**
- **Obtain a fin clip (an adipose fin clip or a clip from any other fins) as well as a sample of dorsal muscle tissue (at least 2cm x 2cm),**
- **the weight and fork length measurement of the fish.**

If you have permission from the owner, fish can be stored in a suitable, sealed plastic bag in a standard domestic freezer before collection. Please also store the capture details together with the fish in a separate sealed plastic bag if at all possible.

Please also be vigilant for any early or unusual spawning activity particularly during late July, August and September when pink salmon are most likely to be active in spawning areas – particularly in shallow, gravelly glides and runs. Any suspected activity should also be reported to us as soon as possible.

For further information please contact:

National Enquiries relating to pink salmon management

Simon Toms, National Fisheries Management Team Leader, Environment Agency

Mobile: **07778 991603** Email: simon.toms@environment-agency.gov.uk

Reporting of captured pink salmon by anglers and netsmen

Please contact Jonathan Shelley who is co-ordinating reports from anglers

Contact details for Jonathan Shelley are:

Mobile: **07979 704 281** Email jonathan.shelley@environment-agency.gov.uk.

National Customer Contact Centre

If you have a general fisheries enquiry please telephone our National customer contact number on **03708 506 506**.

Annex 1: Identification of Pink Salmon

Pacific pink salmon, when fresh from the sea, are steel blue to blue-green on their backs, silver on the flanks and white on their bellies. There are large black spots on the backs, upper flanks, adipose fins and tail – some of the spots on the tail can be as large as the fish's eyes. They are very uniform in size, reaching only 40 to 60cms in length. It is possible that at first sight, a fresh pink salmon may be confused with a small Atlantic salmon.

Pink salmon: Ocean phase

Image – Environment Agency

Pink salmon: Freshwater phase

Images courtesy of Helmsdale DSFB & River Dee Trust and Nigel Fell

Note the shape of the tail, spots on tail and dark mouth. Breeding males are immediately identifiable because of their humps and they will almost certainly be running milt at this time of year. Their black tongues and heavily spotted tails are also very obvious. Females will show heavily spotted tails and be pinkish-brown on the flanks.