

Catching Wairau salmon – Ben Sowry (Fish & Game Councillor and Ranger)

I was asked to give a couple of tips on catching salmon in the Wairau.

Now, I'm no expert, and I haven't tried everything that everyone has tried. I can only talk about what I've done to catch fish.

Because there's so, so much to be talked about on the topic of catching salmon in the Wairau, I'm going to break it into a series of posts over the next few days: the gear, the fish, and fishing the river.

PART I: THE GEAR

I guess first things first: the gear.

Well, the most important piece of kit for salmon angling is a small piece of plastic: It's called a sports fish license from Fish and Game NZ. Salmon, along with trout, perch and tench, are sports fish, and a license is necessary to both fish for, and harvest them. And, if anyone wants to try their luck without one, know that the Wairau is very well policed by several of the local rangers. You might get yourself a criminal conviction as a bycatch- so it's probably better just to play the rules.

Wairau salmon are not particularly big as far as salmon go, six to fourteen pounds is about the usual. Also, as far as salmon rivers go, the Wairau is probably better described as a salmon creek, it certainly doesn't have the volume of the Waimak, Rakaia or Waitaki.

Due to this, most people use heavy trout spinning gear, and that is adequate really (I even once managed to catch a Wairau salmon on a six weight fly rod, with six pound tippet) Rather than the heavier, 'Canterbury style' salmon gear.

I do use a 'Canterbury style' set, but that's more because I owned a set before moving to the region. My set up is a 7.5 foot, 2-4kg graphite 'slowjig' rod. I see most salmon sets in the fishing shops (especially the chain stores) selling 6-8kg rods for salmon. This is WAY to heavy. You will lose sensitivity, and with the often-subtle takes of a salmon, you want to feel EVERYTHING.

I use a baitcast reel, because that's what I'm comfortable using, with a left hand retrieve. I use a left hand retrieve, because I cast right handed. Salmon are well known as 'the fish of a thousand casts', so, if I am to cast a thousand casts, I don't want to be swapping hands every time the lure goes in or out of the river.

For the line, I use a PE-2 line (20lb polyethene braid). Braid, I believe, is essential to detect the delicate takes of the salmon, and to feel the lure hitting the bottom. On the end, I attach two meters of 20lb fluorocarbon trace with an FG knot.

This brings us to what goes on the end: the lure.

I have heard of people catching Wairau salmon on rapalas, softbaits, flies and all sorts. For myself, I use what I always use for salmon: A 22gm Zed spinner. I'd say that, in a river situation, the 22gm Zed has caught more salmon in NZ in the last couple of decades than all the other lures put together. Some people use the Colorado spoon and weight method, but for myself, I just run with a zeddy. I do like to have some smaller ones in my box as well- a couple of 16gm zeds for really clear water. As for colour: there's a whole heap out there, but I keep it as simple as this: White on a cloudy day, silver on a sunny day. I don't feel the need to go more complicated than that. Sometimes, if the river is very low and clear, I will run a copper coloured 16gm zed, but I'm pretty sure a silver would work as effectively.

The most overlooked part of tackle is probably the most important: the hooks! First thing I do, when I buy a new zeddy, is take off the hook, throw it away, and replace it with another one. The hooks on most zed spinners are MASSIVE. Big hooks are harder to set. Remember that salmon are not feeding. They will generally not smash and grab the lure; they will, instead, mouth it as it comes past them. A smaller, stronger, and deadly sharp hook will penetrate better than a big clumsy one. Smaller hooks also allow the spinner to 'swim' better. I use VMC trebles, and a #2 or #4 is a perfect size for 16 and 22gm zeds.

Also, carry spares! Change the hook every half to one hour of fishing, or after a snag. You'll basically be dragging the bottom the whole time, and the river bed will dull the hooks. You want them sharp- Deadly sharp! I also carry a hook sharpening stone in my pocket, and every five minutes or so, I will run each point on it a few times. Carry it in your pocket. If it's in your lure box in your bag, you'll never use it.

Other things that are useful, but I won't go into depth over:

Decent boots for wading, and gravel guards or putties.

Braid scissors, and a multitool or swiss army knife.

Polarised sunglasses and a hat (for seeing salmon habitat mainly, but the Wairau is a river where you can sight fish for salmon) Camera.

And a chilli bin with ice, or drink bottles filled with frozen water, left in the truck. If you do end up with a salmon, it's nice to know that by the time you get it home, it will be in immaculate condition for the table.

Well, that's probably enough on the gears. Tomorrow I'll write about what we're actually there for: the salmon, and their habits.

