

# Release Methods for Wild Salmon

*By Steve Theberge*

## Why Release Fish, Especially Salmon?

**T**here are many reasons a recreational fisher might want to release a fish.

The fish might not be large enough. The quality of the fish may be poor.

The fisher might be fishing for the fun of catching the fish and have no desire to eat the fish. The fisher may want to release fish from wild stock to breed and thus keep those stocks viable. However, the most common reason for releasing salmon and steelhead in Oregon is fishery regulations that say you must release them. The regulations are designed to protect our fishery resources, keep wild runs sustainable, and protect listed stocks.

Currently, wild ocean coho and steelhead and wild coho and steelhead in most rivers in Oregon are protected from recreational harvest. Some runs of wild Chinook are protected as well. It is important to check Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife regulations online and in the agency's yearly regulatory recreational manual to review the most current regulations for where you are fishing.

Then it is important to know which fish you have to release and how to release them without causing them too much damage or stress. It is also important to know how to tell wild fish from hatchery fish and how to identify the different salmonids so you do not inadvertently break the law. For example, most hatchery fish have their adipose fin clipped to differentiate them from wild fish.

## Releasing Salmonids

If you can keep only hatchery fish, and not wild fish, of the species you have just caught, try to look for the adipose fin as soon as the fish gets close to the boat or shore. Also look for other important characteristics to identify which species of salmon you are bringing in.



*Left: Chinook with an intact adipose fin.*

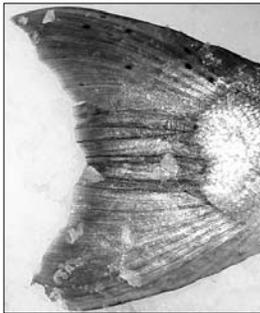
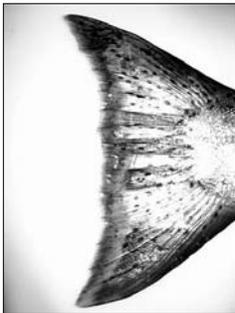
*Below: Fin-clipped Chinook.*



Chinook have a dark lining around the gums whereas coho have a white lining. The spots on a Chinook's tail extend to the bottom of the tail whereas the coho typically has spots only on the top half of the tail fin. In the ocean, Chinook tend to have a slight purplish tint and coho tend to be more greenish in color.



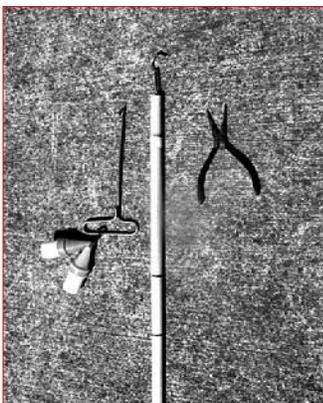
*The gum line of Chinook is dark (upper photo), whereas that of coho is white (bottom photo).*



*Far left: Spots appear on both the upper and lower lobes of a Chinook tail. Right: Spots appear only on the upper part of a coho tail fin.*

If you must restrain the fish to confirm the absence or presence of an adipose fin and identify the species, use a net and keep the fish in the water. A knotless or rubber-coated net or cotton net is better than a knotted nylon net because it causes less loss of scales and slime. Use a gaff or hook-release device to take the hook out of the fish in the water if it has to be released. A long-nosed pliers or hemostat can be used to back out the hook.

Whatever you do, be sure you are allowed to keep the fish before stunning and bleeding it.



**Left:** Tools for releasing fish. **Right:** Special knotless net designed to reduce abrasion and loss of scales when fish are being held in net.

Avoid the following:

- Touching the gills or eyes

Use the following precautions:

- Handle the fish as little as possible and then, gently.
- Keep the fish in the water if at all possible.
- If you must handle the fish, handle it with wet hands, wet gloves, or a wet towel to avoid removing protective slime.
- Back out hooks or cut leader as close to the hook as possible on throat-hooked fish.
- Release the fish as quickly as possible.
- If using downriggers, use a heavy leader behind the downrigger. Grab the heavy leader to control the fish, and then use the gaff on the hook as a way to shake the hook out of the fish's mouth without touching the fish with your hands or taking the fish out of the water. A simple cup hook or large barbless hook on the end of a dowel can also be used to shake or extract the hook from the fish's jaw. You simply run the gaff or hook down the line until it is on the hook, then use it to pull or shake the hook out.
- Lures are a better choice than bait if catching many fish that have to be released.

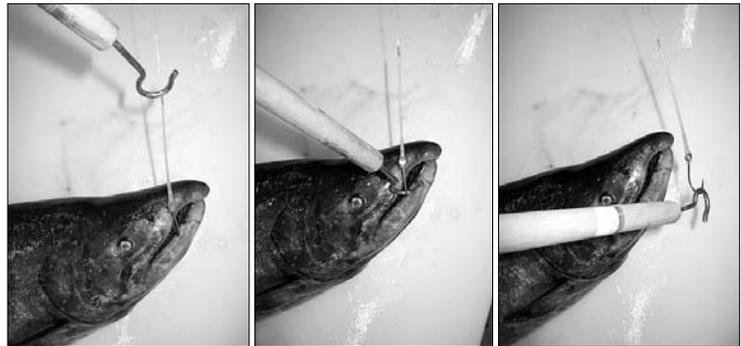


*Releasing a wild steelhead without taking it out of the water.*

*Releasing a small Chinook, using a gaff to debook the fish. The fish does not come into the boat, does not lose its scales, and is easily released.*



*A homemade debooker, demonstrated on a Chinook salmon.*



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