When Will the Salmon Come?

Advices from Elders

Knowledge from lower and middle Yukon River Elders and fishers

Compiled by

YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

Illustrated by Beth Peluso
Natural Indicators

Elders watch for signs or natural indicators all year long to prepare for hunting, fishing, and gathering.

They can read these signs to know when the salmon will come and how many salmon will arrive.
Wind

Wind tells us what kind of salmon will come and where and when the salmon will enter the river.

North and west winds cause the salmon to enter the south mouth of the Yukon River. [Emmonak]

Lots of north wind causes salmon to head to the Black River and Hooper Bay. [Emmonak]

South wind causes salmon to enter the north and middle mouths of the Yukon River. [Emmonak]

East wind causes salmon to pass the Yukon River and head up to Norton Sound. [Emmonak]

North and northwest winds bring king salmon to Hooper Bay. [Hooper Bay]

North winter winds bring smaller king salmon and south winter winds bring longer king salmon. [St. Mary’s]

North winds bring black-backed king salmon while south winds bring whitenoses. [Emmonak]

“Old people used to say, when it’s north and west wind in the wintertime that means there’ll be more fish on the south mouth and Black River. When they see south wind blowing mostly in winter and east wind, the fish will be on the north mouth.”

—Michael Andrews, Emmonak
Birds

Birds show us when the salmon will arrive and how many salmon will come.

"They say in our tradition whenever these mud swallows come flying, our ancestors say that whenever the swallows are here, the king salmon are here."

—Gabe Moses, Hooper Bay

Salmon arrive after the mud or cliff swallows. [Emmonak, Hooper Bay, Mountain Village]

Bird returns reflect how the salmon will return - timing, numbers, and patterns. [Emmonak, St. Mary’s]

More eggs in a nest means more salmon will return. [Emmonak]

The longer birds stay, the more salmon will arrive. [St. Mary’s]

The more birds there are, the more salmon will come. [St. Mary’s, Koyukuk]

Certain birds (known as fish birds) come to the river’s edge and sing a song when the salmon are near. [Grayling, Koyukuk]
Insects

Insects tell us how many salmon will come and when they will arrive.

“When the butterfly come, there’s a big yellow butterfly that tells us that the king salmon is coming close, and the white butterfly tells us the dog salmon is coming.”

—Franklin Madros, Kaltag

“The more mosquitoes there are, the more abundance of bears and more abundance of fish coming in.”

—Paul Jones, Emmonak

“When there are many black flies and mosquitoes, many salmon will come. [Emmonak, St. Mary’s]

King salmon arrive with yellow and black butterflies. [Kaltag]

Chum salmon arrive with white butterflies. [Kaltag]
Richer, darker (blueback/blacknose) king salmon arrive first, followed by the larger whitenose king salmon. [Hooper Bay, Emmonak, Alakanuk, Nulato, Kaltag]

Herring arrive first, followed by chum salmon. [Hooper Bay]

Regular chum salmon arrive first, followed by silver chum salmon which are more desirable for eating. [Hooper Bay]

Smelt arrive before king salmon. [Emmonak, St. Mary’s]

Sheefish arrive before or at end of king salmon pulses. [St. Mary’s]

Sheefish arrive before king salmon. [Kaltag]
The numbers and size of some fish tell us how many king salmon will return.

King salmon are smaller when there are many. [Hooper Bay, St. Mary’s]

When there are many sheefish in the river, king salmon will be fewer; when sheefish are few, many king salmon will come. [St. Mary’s]

Many eels in the fall will be followed by many king salmon the next summer. [St. Mary’s]

Big fat whitefish mean a good run of king salmon. [Galena]

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THE ELDERS USED TO TELL US: IF THERE’S SMALLER KING SALMON THAT MEANS CROWDED, TOO MANY; CROWDED.”

—JAMES GUMP, HOOPER BAY
Plants

Plants tell us when the salmon will come and how many salmon will arrive.

Good plant growth means many salmon. [St. Mary’s]

When grass reaches knee height and the rhubarb starts to grow, it is time to get ready for the arrival of salmon. [St. Mary’s]

Cotton flying from trees means the king salmon run is ending. [St. Mary’s]

Cotton flying from trees means the king salmon are arriving. [Grayling, Kaltag]

When there is lots of cotton from trees, salmon will be many. [Grayling]

“When the cotton starts flying, the salmon are home.”
— Fred Huntington, Galena
“When it’s colder there’s more fish, when it’s warmer there’s less fish... The colder the water is, the more fish they’ll get.”
—NICHOLAS SMITH, HOOPER BAY

Water temperature and level tell us when the salmon will come and how many salmon will arrive.

**IF THE WATER IS WARM DURING SALMON SEASON, SALMON WILL BE FEWER. [HOOPER BAY]**

Salmon will not enter the river at the mouth if the water is too warm. [Kotik, Emmonak]

A high tide brings fish into Hooper Bay. [Hooper Bay]

A lot of snow will be followed by many salmon. [Hooper Bay, Emmonak, Galena]

The river water level rises when the salmon arrive. [Scammon Bay, Mountain Village, Grayling, Kaltag]
Weather

Weather tells us when fishing will be good, and the moon is one sign of weather.

More fish are caught when it’s windy, stormy, or cloudy. [Hooper Bay]

Thunderstorms tell us when the salmon will arrive and how many there will be. [St. Mary’s]

A low moon in the sky is a sign of snow or rain. [St. Mary’s, Koyukuk]

A moon shaped like a bowl is a sign of rain all summer. [St. Mary’s, Koyukuk]

"[My Grandpa] used to say when we get thunderclouds in springtime, depending on how much thunderclouds or lightning, they’d use that as a way to tell how much and whether or not the fish were coming. He used to say, depending on how much thunder, they’re waking up the fish and getting them ready to come in to spawn."

—Mary Patst, St. Mary’s
Search & Find

How many natural indicators can you find and what do they mean?

OTHER ACTIVITIES:

☐ Talk to Elders and learn about natural indicators in your village.
☐ Have a salmon celebration.
☐ Learn Native names for the indicators and fish.
☐ Learn traditional ways of fishing, making nets, and putting up fish.
Yukon River
Elders are teaching these signs to scientists to help them know when the salmon will come and how many there will be.

Background:
This book has been created because the Elders of the Yukon River want this information to be documented, shared with youth, and passed to future generations. In the past, the Elders were the teachers and the scientists. Their knowledge is place-based and has accumulated over thousands of years. Their knowledge is a resource that should not be lost, it should continue to be held by their descendants.

In the classroom:
A teacher tool kit has been developed to accompany this book in the classroom. It offers suggested activities, ways to engage elders and youth within your community, and ways for teachers to meet the Alaska Performance Standards. Contact Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association for more information 1-877-999-8566 or www.yukonsalmon.org.

Signs Along the River

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First and foremost, special thanks to the many knowledgeable Elders and active fishers of the lower and middle Yukon River who shared their knowledge, time, and insight to make this book a reality.

Emmonak
Mary Ann Andrews
Michael Andrews
John Bird
Mary Ann Immomak
Peter Moore
William Trader
Benedit Tucker

Hooper Bay
Nathan Fisher
James Gump
Gabe Moses
George Moses
Newa Rivers
Peter Sarton, Sr.
Helen Smith
David Simon, Sr.
Carl Smith
Catherine Smith
James Smith
Nicola Smith
Evan Tomaganuk
Silas Tomaganuk

St. Mary’s
Hilda Akstrom
Pat Beans, Jr.
Sophie Beans
Evan Kaukavskoff
Mike Joe
Liz Joe
Clarence Johnson
Lillian Johnson
Mary Patsy
Charlie Paukan

Maggie Paukan
Mary Paukan
Carrie Spary
Daniel Stevens, Sr.
Theresa Stevens
John Thompson, Sr.
Marcia Thompson

Kaltag
Mary Rose Agnes
Barb Arquell
Dale Arquell
Richard Burnham
Robert Dentler
Austin Esmailka
Justin Esmailka
Franklin Madros, Sr.
Albert Nickolai
Lawrence Saunders
Goodwin Semaken

Grayling
Herman Deacon
Rose Golike
Freddie Howard
Joe Madelle
Rose Madelle
Mary Mountain
Gab Nichei

Koyukuk
Benedict Jones

Mountain Village
Simon Harpak
Josephine Harpak

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