

Kings are failing to return to their rivers



By Richard Mauer | Posted: Mon 7:23 PM, Jul 02, 2018 | Updated: Wed 12:21 PM, Jul 04, 2018

ANCHORAGE (KTUU) — Ship Creek closes to all fishing this week. King salmon returns from the giant Yukon River to the world famous Stikine in Southeast are very low. From Canada's Fraser River system all the way to California, kings are missing in action.

While experts debate the cause — from global warming to the warm water “blob” in the Gulf of Alaska to increased pressure from fishing nets — kings, or Chinook salmon, are not doing what they're supposed to do — return in droves to their natal rivers.

Ship Creek, Anchorage's industrial-zone salmon river, is closed as of 12:01 a.m. Tuesday. The closure is set to last till the expected return of silvers in mid-July.

Only the Nushagak River, in the salmon-rich Bristol Bay region, is expected to have a normal king run, said Ed Jones, of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game's sportfish division.

“It seems to be an outlier,” Jones said of the river.

While the Yukon and Kuskokwim should meet escapement goals of kings, only about 3,000 kings are expected to get past the hazards of the Kenai River and spawn — 900 fewer than the state's escapement goal, Jones said.

“The Anchor (River) is a bust,” Jones said. “The Deshka is not looking good — the same with the Little Susitna River. The Copper River looks to be doing OK — it's going to make its goal.”

And, added Juneau-based Jones, “It's tough times in Southeast. The Taku and Stikine are projected to have the worse runs on record for Chinook.” ☒

British Columbia's Fraser River will also see weak returns, Jones said. "It's going to go all the way to California. Everything points to poor marine survival. We don't know why that happens."

Whatever the cause, Bait Shack owner Dustin Slinker, who rents fishing gear to tourists from all over the world and sells bait, tackle and licenses to locals who come to fish Ship Creek, said he is fine with closing fishing – even if it cuts into his profits.

"In the long term, these fish are a natural resource," Slinker said. "If we don't protect them and we continue to fish them, even though these are hatchery fish, we're just going to fish them out – there will be nothing left – and then I think everyone will really be angry then."

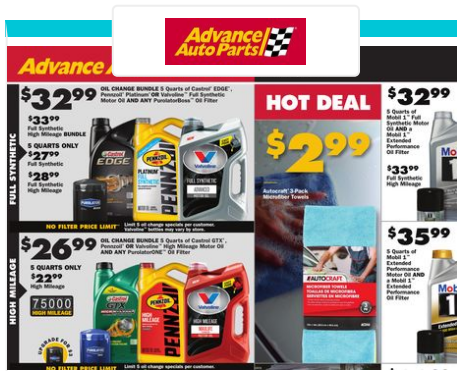
The Ship Creek kings are returning to a hatchery home, so in one sense it's not a wild run. But those kings are also the source for restocking the creeks and rivers around Southcentral Alaska, Slinker said. If Ship Creek fish disappear, the state's stocking program will go with it, he added.

"The state gets them at the hatchery, not only for future stockings of this system, but the Eklutna Tailrace – and many of the landlocked salmon put into Southcentral Alaska come off of these fish. Other fisheries throughout the state also get salmon from these Ship Creek Chinooks down here."

While kings may be rare this year, other species remain plentiful, officials say. The state just increased catch and possession limits for reds caught in parts of the Russian and Kenai rivers. And subsistence and commercial fishermen, at least in the lower portions of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, have large numbers of other fish for their nets, said Holly Carroll, a manager for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Correction: An earlier version of the story said Holly Carroll worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She works for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game.

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