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A KOKANEES EDUCATION

On-the-water education pays off for Marilyn Hendrickson and Jared Johnson of Rocky Mountain Tackle.
(SEP & MARILYN HENDRICKSON)



STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLAMING GORGE TRANSLATE INTO YOUR LOCAL KOKE LAKES

VACAVILLE—During the last two decades, the popularity of kokanee fishing in Northern California has exploded. This fishery has become so popular in fact, that many anglers have left other target species behind to concentrate on and pursue the exciting and engaging landlocked sockeye salmon.

We see it all the time, and, frankly, it doesn't surprise us one bit.

Kokanee anglers readily purchase the latest tackle, accessories, electronics, down-

riggers and more to help them increase their catch, but, to be honest, their never-ending search for knowledge and answers to the "when, where, how and why?" of kokanee fishing is really what they need and desire the most.

Information, it turns out, is king.

California's anglers are fortunate to have a network of kokanee organizations, professional guides, informative seminar speakers, internet websites, message boards, fishing

periodicals and free-flowing information to help answer some of the questions, but as anybody who's ever wet a line for ANY species well knows, there is no replacement for a good, focused, on-the-water, education.

For the past 25 years we have tirelessly pursued kokanee in many of Northern California's prime kokanee waters, learning as we go from our mistakes, listening to local anglers and guides, and adjusting our approach through our own experiences. With

every trip, we learn something new. We stumble upon it, figure it out for ourselves or someone shares a successful technique, suggestion or location, and we lock it away inside our brains.

We all learn the same way: through experience.

But here's an idea that you may have to take awhile to wrap your head around: there's a better, faster (and frankly EASIER) way to learn how to catch more and bigger kokanee. And it's at an out-of-state center for higher kokanee learning.

Welcome to the University of Flaming Gorge

California's anglers have prime kokanee waters throughout the northern tier of the state, but in recent years, hundreds (if not thousands) of Golden State kokanee anglers annually travel to Flaming Gorge Reservoir, a massive body of water located on the borders of Utah and Wyoming just 2 1/2 hours east of Salt Lake City.

Call it a pilgrimage. Call it ridiculous. Whatever the case, a growing number of Californians are making the 13-hours-each-way trip to this kokanee destination, and many of them (ourselves included) are making multiple or extended stays there every season.

The reason is simple: Flaming Gorge is kokanee fishing AS GOOD AS IT CAN POSSIBLY BE.

Breaking the Gorge learning curve

It's the lure of kokanee in the 3- to 6-pound range that attracts anglers to ply their skills at Flaming Gorge, but as any of you who have fished for salmon in the target-rich waters of Alaska are well aware, there's a big-time side benefit to fishing the waters of the a place like the Gorge: the learning curve.

Even though Californians head there to catch big kokes, they return with an education that will help them catch more fish close to home.

From the moment you turn on your locator, you can see the numbers that make this reservoir so special. Kokanee are everywhere: singles, small groups and large schools of fish, actively feeding and attacking properly presented offerings.

The sheer numbers of fish you can catch each day allow you to learn instinctively. It's possible to catch and release 50 to 100 kokanee or more, in a single day, and you can't do that without learning something new ... just like we do!

On a good day, when you're catching a fish or two every few minutes, you really start to learn – and F-A-S-T – the best colors, speed, actions, scents, depths and a whole lot more. Every bit of that knowledge should be applied to your local fishery.

Our first major lesson

On a trip to the Gorge several years ago, we learned the single most important aspect (in our opinion) of successful kokanee trolling at any body of water. After catching a nice koke, we checked the leader and dodger/spinner rigs and found them in good order. We loaded the spinner with scent, let out line, connected it to the downrigger release and lowered the offering to the desired level.

Seconds later, the very same rod was slammed and the fight was on again. We fought and released that fish, checked lines, loaded the lure with scent and sent it down again.

BAM, another fish within seconds, on the same rod. We obviously had the right depth, speed, action and color combination so we switched another rod to the same rig and sent it down.

BAM, another fish on. By the time we caught our eighth fish in a row on the same rod and rig, we figured it out: fresh scent, and lots of it, caused one rod to get the strikes time after time after time. We soon learned that fresh scent applied at least every 10 minutes to all rigs makes a huge impact on the number of fish we catch. Make it happen by adding extra scent at every possible opportunity.

We now pick up all lines every 10 minutes or so, and re-scent if we don't hook up. This one learned experience helps us catch more fish at the Gorge and more importantly, more fish in California too.

Gear lessons learned the hard way

With fish in the 3- to 6-pound size, it doesn't take long to figure out that line test and knot strength need to be optimum due to the size of the kokes. Ten-pound-test leaders can be destroyed by a 3-pound kokanee slamming trolled offering on a downrigger release, so you learn quickly to upgrade your line strength and knots for these mega-sized kokes. You may also find out all too fast that your drag system may need a little work or the bearings or bushings replaced for a smoother drag operation.

Another good lesson learned is precise depth

control. Watch your locator closely. Observe the depths on the graph and ensure that your downrigger presentations are at the correct depth. Keep them approximately 5 feet above the fish in a perfect attack range.

Don't just sit there and mindlessly troll. Adjust your depth for every fish you see on the screen and you'll increase your odds for success. GO AFTER THE FISH! Don't wait for the fish to come to you.

Remember this Flaming Gorge lesson: Always keep your terminal offerings above the fish and adjust your depth at every opportunity to intercept every fish possible.

One day at the Gorge we learned a valuable lesson and clearly saw the results of changing speed and the use of exaggerated "S" turns, which greatly enhance your chances of hooking up. As you troll and turn from side to side, the lure on the inside of the turn will slow down and drop deeper. The outside line consequently speeds up and changes the action and vibration of your offering. This technique allows lures to imitate escaping minnows or baitfish and can often cause impulse strikes from your quarry.

Screen savvy

Your locator will show you more and teach you more when you're on a body of water with lots of fish. By seeing lots of fish on the screen at the same time, you'll learn how to better interpret what you see on your locator. It's easier to tell what they are doing - sitting still, moving and actively feeding or simply laying on the bottom, taking a break.

Post-graduate education

We learned many lessons at Flaming Gorge and have used them on California waters time and time again. When you catch big numbers of fish anywhere, you soon start to realize the patterns that work, and work well. It's possible to learn the same techniques anywhere, but a world-class fishery like the Gorge offers a faster education program due to the numbers of fish you will meet in a single day.

It's all about repetitions. If you do something over and over again and pay attention, you're going to get better at it. So the next time you're thinking about going fishing, approach it with the attitude that you're going back to school for an education, and then head straight to your favorite kokanee water.

Editor's Note: Listen in as Sep & Marilyn lead the discussion every Saturday morning on 'California Sportsman', 6 to 8 a.m. on Sacramento's KHTK 1140. Podcasts are up at Seps.com