

Reeling in the fun – and Kokanee – on Lake Tahoe



Capt. Andrew Lubrano, center, shows Mike Zamarripa and Logan Daniels of Reno the basics of fishing Kokanee salmon. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

CAVE ROCK – “He just gave us the fin and swam away.”

That’s Capt. Andrew Lubrano’s way of saying the fish won that round, time to put some new bait on the hook and cast the line out again.

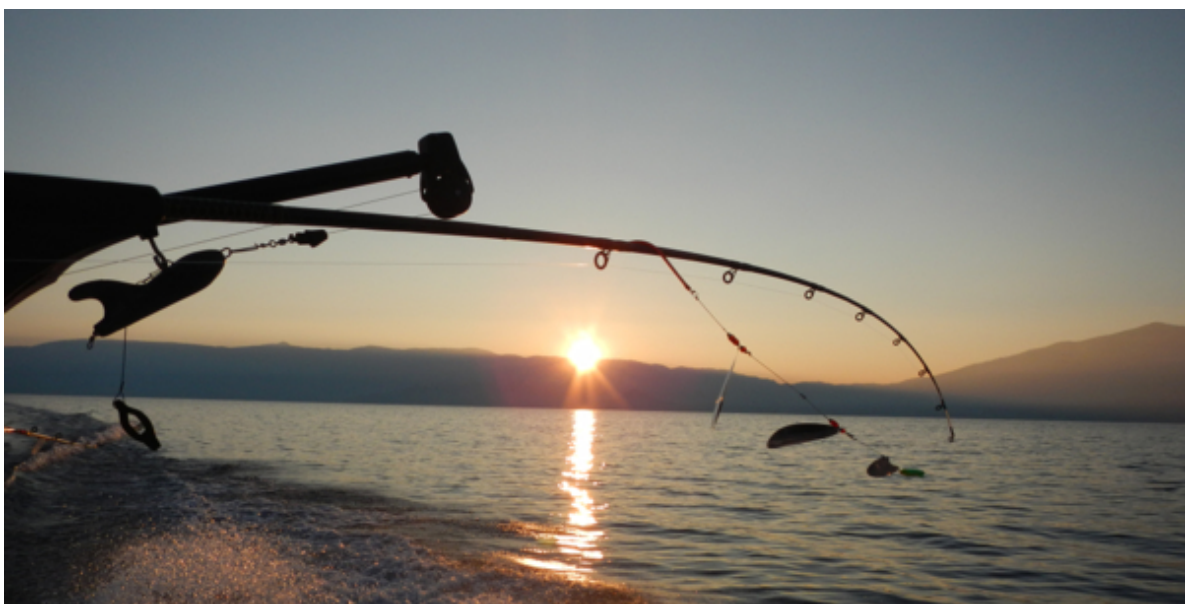
There was a lot of that going on last Sunday. There were also two happy fishermen who went home to Reno with nine Kokanee salmon. Five per person is the limit.

Trolling near the Cascade area of the South Shore, other boats are doing the same thing. They are all close to the mouth of Taylor Creek, where these salmon will soon make their way upstream to spawn. They will have changed color from blue-green to fiery red, and their jaws will change to be more protruding. One of the fish caught last weekend was already was starting to have its jaw transform.

Now is the time to catch these salmon that call Lake Tahoe home. Normally they are biting between July and the end of September, though they started to do so later this summer.

Lubrano operates Nor-Cal Charters; with three boats in his fleet. The 22-year-old has been fishing on Lake Tahoe since he was 5. He got his captain's license at age 18 and started the business a year later. Today he is getting his master's in education administration from Sierra Nevada College, with the goal of being a fishing captain on a seasonal basis.

Once October rolls around it will mostly be mackinaw at the other end of the line. Rainbow and brown trout start biting as it gets cooler. Lake Tahoe is one of the few places where fishing is allowed year-round.



The day starts early for fishing charters at Lake Tahoe.

Changing the ecosystem

Lubrano said he and other captains believe the drought is contributing to a less robust fishing season because fewer nutrients were carried into the lake with the decreased runoff.

Kokanee aren't native to Tahoe.

"Kokanee were 'accidentally' introduced into Lake Tahoe in 1944 from holding ponds that overflowed at the old Tahoe City Fish Hatchery. Three years after their accidental introduction, the salmon returned to Tahoe City to spawn," Lisa Herron with the U.S. Forest Service told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Knowing that the Kokanee would survive in Lake Tahoe, it was decided that the hatchery would do a yearly planting of fingerlings in the tributary streams. These plantings began in 1949. Today, California Department of Fish and Wildlife continues to plant fingerlings in Taylor Creek to maintain a healthy population."

Between 1963 and 1965, California and Nevada officials introduced mysid shrimp to Tahoe with the belief this would be a food source for the Kokanee and in turn would be a boon to the sport fishing industry. Instead, messing with the ecosystem had the opposite affect.

"This freshwater shrimp has been known to prey on other zooplankton; however, due to the limited food sources in Lake Tahoe, this large omnivorous shrimp increased predation on native zooplankton and led to the near-extinction of the zooplankter *Daphnia*, an important prey species for Kokanee," according to the Tahoe Environmental Research Center. "Ironically the introduction of mysis did not only fail as a food source, it also significantly reduced and important natural prey species. This highlights the need for a science-based component when conducting ecosystem management."



Logan Daniels and Mike Zamarripa show off their catch.

Reeling in the fun

Rods dot the back of the vessel. Eyes are on the lines that have disappeared about 250 down in water that is about 400-foot deep. Lubrano points to one and has either Mike Zamarripa or Logan Daniels reel it in.

“Keep steady pressure. If it pulls hard, slow down, but never stop,” Lubrano says as the men reel in what they hope is a fish at the end.

Lubrano tells the fishermen not to pull on the line because with the Kokanee having such soft lips it will just rip them.

Corn is used as bait – and just one kernel.

“More corn doesn’t mean more fish. If it did, we would use the whole cob,” Lubrano says.

Zamarripa is the last to land a fish, but then comes on strong. It was his line, though, that got the most bites.

Fishing is all about the peacefulness for him. On this particular day there was plenty of that.

The three men talk about different fishing shows. There's camaraderie among those who fish – even if they've just met.



Kokanee salmon are likely to be biting through September.

Life on the lake

Leaving Cave Rock about 6am it was chilly and the sun was not up. This is one of the few boat ramps at Tahoe that is able to accommodate the cadre of fishing boats because of the lake level. They are lined up waiting for the ranger to unlock the gate.

Soon the ball of yellow came over the mountains and illuminated the lake like a spotlight. Smoke from the fires burning throughout Northern California made it so it was hard to see land at all ends of the lake.

By 8:30am five Kokanee were in the bucket.

And by this time the world beyond fishermen started to come to life on the lake – water skiers, paddleboarders and kayakers.

Still, the peacefulness ensued and the lines continued to be

dropped and reeled in until it was time to let the fish swim in their own serenity without a hook in the water.