



Fish and Farm

Farm in Alaska presents homestead routines that are both similar and different

By Michael Merrick, MD

The usual homestead routine is familiar to all Hobby Farm readers--planting, cultivating, harvesting and processing. When your farm is in Alaska, like mine, it's the same routine only greatly compressed. The garden, not planted until Memorial Day weekend, gets a late start, but the long hours of sunlight make everything grow exceptionally fast. By mid-June my Boer goats are knee-deep in their pasture and no matter how much they eat the timothy-clover mix keeps up with their grazing. The visual contrast of their red heads deep in the green grass is beautiful to watch.

One enjoyable activity unique to Alaska is something called "personal use fishing." Residents, but not visitors or tourists, are allowed to harvest 25 fish for the head of a household, plus 10 additional fish per dependent. These can be Silver salmon harvested in Kachemak Bay or Red salmon (Sockeye) in Cook Inlet. The Reds can either be caught in a set net at the beginning of the run in mid-June or in dip nets at the end of the run in late July.

Since I live only a few miles from Cook Inlet but 80 miles from Kachemak Bay and Red salmon taste better than Silvers, I target Reds. These are fish smaller (5 to 7 pounds) than Silvers or King (Chinook) salmon, but their flesh is firmer and tastier. Unlike depleted salmon runs in Oregon and Washington, Alaska has maintained large numbers of these fish. There are almost no hydroelectric dams blocking their movement, the environment is pristine and harvest limits are strictly enforced.

The process starts by getting a free permit from the Alaskan Department of Fish and Game, then driving to the beach site using 4-wheel drive for the last ¼-mile of soft sand. I pull on hip boots and walk out at low tide about 100 yards over mudflats to drive a stake into the sand--¾-inch rebar works well. To the stake I attach a 4-inch diameter ring or pulley and run 600 feet of ½-inch nylon rope through it and back to stakes set above the high tide mark. State rules require 100 feet of space between adjacent nets and all the nets must be within one mile of the mouth of the Kasilof River where it flows into Cook Inlet. It's first-come, first-served like an old fashioned gold rush, so popular sites near the river mouth are sometimes staked out days in advance. Even if there's no spot on opening day, spots open up as people quickly catch their limit and move out.

Fishing is from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., so after staking the running line, I leave for home for last minute repairs to the net and set my alarm for 5 a.m. When the alarm goes off, it's back to the beach with the net, boots and gear in my pickup. At 6 a.m. the running line is attached to 60' of gillnet with a bowline knot. By pulling on the running line, it's possible to drag the gill net out to the ¾-inch rebar stake, then secure the other end of the running line to a stake on dry land. The gillnet is now held perpendicular to the shore line against the tide – its "set." The net consists of a cork line that floats, several feet of nylon web that dangles in the water and a lead line that holds the bottom of the web close to the bottom. The salmon returning to spawn in the river have a difficult time seeing the nylon mesh in the silty waters. The combination of their own efforts to swim forward plus strong ocean currents push them into the webbing where they get tangled by their gills and are caught. The whole experience of watching the captured fish splash in the net, the wheeling seagulls, bracing sea air, campfire, hot coffee and conversations with other fishermen is exciting and relaxing at the same time. As the tide comes in, we continue to pull the net closer to ourselves until at high tide the fish are picked from the web, usually about eight to 15 but it can be any number from zero to a "plugged net." The tail fins are cut off with large scissors to show the Department of Fish and Game that these are personal use fish--not for sale--and then the net is put back into the water to fish the outgoing tide.

Usually we can get our 35 fish limit in one or two days then turn the site over to friends and direct our attention to processing the catch. Fresh Red salmon is excellent grilled, but the shelf-life of frozen salmon is only about four months. It's preferable to further process a large portion of the fish to lox or kippered salmon which keeps all year.

Making smoked or kippered salmon is something easier that I do myself. It's done by brining fillets for several hours in a salt and sugar solution, rinsing the fish, and then placing on racks in a "Big Chief" smoker for about 20 hours using several pans of alder or hickory woodchips.

As you can tell, personal use fishing creates several days of intense activity all mixed in with my usual medical practice and regular farm chores, but it's a summertime favorite. The Department of Fish and Game estimates the 2006 salmon run at over five million fish returning to Cook Inlet. This is a huge number of high-quality, wild fish and I'm looking forward to getting a share of this renewable natural resource.