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## Crank Crushin' Kings

By Kyle Buck for Woods -n- Waters News

The crank splashed down just upstream of the log jam digging downward with the retrieve. Swinging outside of the jam the current pushed the lure, changing its trajectory slightly upstream. A perfect presentation for a strike in anyone's book.

What're we talkin' here...bass fishing... river smallies? Read on.

The fish strikes hard nearly pulling the rod right out of the anglers hands. Feeling the sting of the hooks, the big males double hook jawed head comes clear of the river propelled upward by a 12 inch wide tail. The shear bulk of the fish keeps it from completely clearing the water; even so, the big Chinook makes a downstream, leaning, fifty foot tail walk. The spinning reel screams while giving up thirty pound braid.

Staying down, the fish continues to strip line. Realizing the fish wasn't close to stopping I lift the anchor and begin dropping down stream. Then the fish changes its mind and direction, steaming up stream almost as fast as he'd gone down. Sending the anchor back to the bottom I watch as Tom Irwin, retired fishing guide and outdoor writer reels furiously to keep up with the finned torpedo. I muse aloud, "Go ahead, tire yourself out." And Irwin looks back laughing and says, "You talkin' to me or the fish?"

Stopping in the hole in front of us, the fish trades punches with Irwin, slowly growing weary - the stout braid and nine foot medium action rod taking its toll. After another few minutes of spirited sparing, the big Chinook rolls to the surface and Irwin guides it to the net.

That was last September and we were fishing the lower end of the Muskegon

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River between Bridgeton and Maple Island. That particular day we landed ten kings and lost numerous other battles. And all of the fish fell for crankbaits that most anglers would consider typical walleye fair.

“This is the most fun I’ve had salmon fishing since I went to Alaska in ’97”, said Irwin. And he added, “I wish I new how effective cranks were for kings when I was on the Kenai River.”

I started casting cranks for late summer/early fall kings about five years ago and actually stumbled upon it by accident. While pre-fishing for a bass tournament on Muskegon Lake I ducked into the mouth of the river and my third cast with a Rattle Trap was slammed by a king. It was so much fun that I forgot all about my up-coming tournament and spent the next three days playing with Chinook in the lower river.

Cranks are so versatile, you can fish them close to cover, you can fish them fast and shallow or slow and deep. Also, when a king smacks a crank, there's no doubt that *is* what he meant to. Even when we occasionally foul hook a fish on a crank, they're usually fish that took a swipe at the bait.

I think cranks work best in water from four to eight feet in depth and they're especially effective early in the season when rivers are low and slow. Often during late August, September and early October west Michigan rivers are lower than during any other time of year. When the rivers are low and slow there are some areas where there isn't enough current to effectively drop back plugs or drift spawn. Cranks have their own inherent action and vibration which proves especially annoying to river run kings.

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Some of the best casting cranks for kings are the same lures that anglers troll with for summertime walleyes. Deep Thunderstick Juniors are one of my favorites, but other

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good cranks include Shad Raps, Walleye Divers and deep diving Rapala Husky Jerks .

While it's tempting to think big when it comes to salmon fishing, I've found that medium sized cranks seem to out perform larger ones. A lot of that probably has to do with the fact that larger cranks tend to run deeper than smaller ones.

Also, don't over look jerk and slash type baits like X-Raps and shallow Husky Jerks. At times, especially during early mornings, kings will take these lures right near the surface. And if you think that top-water for bass is fun, you should see one of these lures being mauled by a raging king.

When it comes to color, my most consistent producer is a fire-tiger pattern. But other combinations of chrome and chartreuse or orange also work well especially on sunny days. The old axiom "dark days, dark lures" does at times hold true. I remember one rainy day last fall where the only strikes we could entice came on a gray backed white bellied Thunderstick.

One problem concerning these lures right out of the box is that the hooks are in most cases not tough enough to tangle with kings. I like to change the hooks out with Owner 3X trebles a red hook on the front and nickel on the back. I do believe that these fish often key in on the red, so I want them to hit the head of the bait to insure a good hook-up.

Bait-casters work well for this type of fishing, but I like medium spinning tackle best. You'll want a spinning reel like the Abu Garcia C304 that will hold up to stress of a rampaging king. Going cheap on a spinning reel will more often than not leave you wishing you'd spent the extra buck.

Braid really shines for this type of fishing. I like 30 Lb. Power Pro in the dark green color. This line is unbelievably strong and casts beautifully on spinning reels. It's also fine enough that even with its opaque nature, fish don't seem to shy from it. Rod

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wise, you need a pole with some back bone but we're not talking super stiff either. I like a 9' Fenwick HMX in medium action this rod has a fast tip that allows you to cast the crankbait accurately.

If you are willing to travel some, the productive season for cranking kings often lasts a six weeks or more. I often start out as early as late August on the Big Manistee and work my way south hitting the Pere Marquette, White and Muskegon Rivers. Often the productive season will last into mid October.

Fishing near cover is key to cranking up kings on all of these rivers. Crank near log jams if you can find them, or trees that have fallen partially into the water. If there's a tree in the water be sure to crank just up stream and downstream of it. The best cover is often found on outside bends of the river. No matter how good the cover looks, if the fish aren't there it's worthless. If you fish for a few minutes with out a follow or bite and you're not seeing actively rolling, jumping or porpoising fish, they're probably not in the area.

When active fish are spotted, don't be afraid to pitch that lure right near shore. I can't tell you how many strikes come on the second, third or fourth crank from shore.

Another trick for triggering strikes is to continually change the swimming direction of the crankbait. By moving your rod tip from an upstream angle to a downstream angle and back again, you subtly change the direction the lure is swimming. And often that subtle change is all that is needed to trigger a strike. On a typical retrieve I like to change the direction three or more times.

Adding a stop and go action to the crank also works well at times for enticing strikes. Continually speed up, slow down, change direction and even let the bait stop dead. All these things can trigger strikes from river kings. More than once I've seen these fish smack a lure right at boat side when an unsuspecting angler stopped his

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retrieve and started lifting the lure out of the water. I will always reel the lure all the way to the rod tip and watch for a following fish.

Crankin' river kings is as exciting as it is productive. I stumbled upon it by accident but I'm definitely not alone. It's a technique that is quickly gaining popularity with both boat and shore bound anglers. And it works on any river that receives a run of Chinook. Those interested in contacting guides who specialize in crankin' river kings should call Great Lakes Guide Service (231) 638-5752 or visit [www.glguideservice.com](http://www.glguideservice.com)

As for table fare, the flesh of salmon deteriorates quickly once they enter their natal rivers, and they're usually only suitable for canning or smoking, and even for this, early run fish are best. The good news is that the thrill of Crankin' up river run kings is in the catching not the eating. River kings are a perfect candidate for catch and release; rivers like the Pere Marquette and the White which never received salmon plants are proof positive of Chinook salmon natural reproduction in Michigan rivers.

Those who say that salmon quit feeding and won't strike when they enter a river couldn't be further from the mark. While it's true that feeding behavior slows once these fish enter the rivers, just one strike on a crankbait will convince the most negative naysayer otherwise.

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