

# ALASKA WILDLIFE TROOPERS HIT ALASKAN WATERS

BY MEGAN PETERS, PIO AND AWT JASON BALL

Alaska Wildlife Trooper Tom Akelkok was walking through the thick brush at Sheep Creek when he saw four poachers catching king salmon.

Within minutes he was standing behind the four men. They already had two almost dead kings caught from waters closed to the fish and were casting for another go-around. It didn't take long for them to figure out they had been caught breaking the law.

"I got 'em on camera," Akelkok said before coming out of the woods to talk to the anglers.

This particular Saturday, Akelkok was patrolling the popular fishing spots along the road system. The sport fish enforcement in Southcentral Alaska began on June 18 and ended July 10, followed by fishery enforcement in the Bristol Bay area.

Wildlife Troopers statewide came into Southcentral to assist in checking the fishing permits of thousands of fisherman hoping to catch "the big one."

However, with dozens upon dozens of anglers not following the regulations, many had to forfeit their fish over to the state. The forfeited fish were then donated to charity.

What is amazing about the patrols is many of the fishermen take the citation with a smile and a response of "thanks" for those brown shirts patrolling the Southcentral waters.

One happy-go-not-so-lucky fisherman held up his illegal fish for a picture – as proof to his buddies that his son caught a beautiful fish – before it was whisked off to be dinner for a needy Alaskan.

Some of the ticket receivers even pass on tips of where they saw other fishermen breaking the law.

This year, Alaska Wildlife Troopers made 4,634 contacts with the public in their enforcement efforts across the state.

The special enforcement netted 416 resource-related tickets ranging from taking fish in closed waters to not having a valid fishing license. Wildlife Troopers also gave out 300 warnings.

The beefed up patrol did snag a few non-resource related offenders, to



**Alaska Wildlife Trooper Thomas Akelkok matches illegal hooks used to catch king salmon when writing tickets for four poaching anglers on the Montana Creek on June 24. The anglers were also cited for not having fishing licenses, fishing in waters closed to kings and not recording the catch on king tags.**

include a DUI arrest, disorderly conduct and a few warrant arrests.

Patrol trucks, unmarked trucks, fixed wing aircraft, river boats and a helicopter were used in by 14 Alaska Wildlife Troopers and Public Safety Technicians on a variety of patrols whether in, undercover or in plain clothes and stake outs during the two month-long effort.

Troopers were out 24 hours a day.

The enforcement stretched from

Ship Creek in Anchorage to the creeks and rivers near Talkeetna for the first portion of the patrols.

Then in July, AWT invaded the Bristol Bay area.

For those not familiar with Bristol Bay, it is located several hundred miles Southwest of Anchorage and can only be accessed by airplane or boat.

Bristol Bay is among other things, home to the world's largest sockeye salmon return. The rugged landscape is filled with hundreds of lakes and streams drawing thousands of hunters, fishermen, and tourists every year. The large return of salmon in Bristol Bay attracts commercial fisherman from all over the world, who return every summer to harvest the salmon.

To address the enforcement needs of the fishery, the Alaska Wildlife Troopers recruit numerous additional Troopers from around the state, resulting in the largest enforcement program conducted annually by the Department of Public Safety.

Additionally, this year AWT joined forces with the U.S. Coast Guard in a combined effort to educate and enforce boating safety laws for the commercial fishing fleet that number over 1,500 vessels. This collaboration led to a record number of commercial fishing vessel exams conducted, and increased



**AWT Thomas Akelkok holds up king salmon he seized and turned over to charity after catching a boy fishing in waters only open to trout fishing.**



**Fishing boats pack the Kvichak River in the Bristol Bay region. AWT performed fisheries enforcement in river in July.**

the overall safety of the fleet.

This year was a very productive one, according to AWT Jason Ball.

AWT had 41 people involved in the effort, including troopers, PSTII's, clerks, boat crews and everyone in between. AWT also had several patrol vessels including the Stimson, Woldstad, Kvichak and several department patrol skiffs.

In addition AWT had two state aircraft used for aerial patrol.

Ball said this was a phenomenal year for the fleet of commercial fishermen in terms of the number of sockeye salmon

that returned to their spawning grounds.

This was especially true for the Nushigak District, where they had the second biggest return of salmon since 1983 with just shy of 8 million fish. This was also the case for the Naknek/Kvichak District which had its largest return since 1999 with over 5.7 million sockeye salmon. The return Bristol Bay wide was well over 20 million sockeye salmon.

From logistics to funding, everything must be planned appropriately in order to have things work properly. Especially with a patrol area as vast as Bristol Bay,

encompassing all of the commercial districts including; the Naknek/Kvichak, Egegik, Nushigak, Ugashik and Togiak districts, Ball said.

The AWT team that made the enforcement effort a success was made up of many seasoned people that had been coming to Bristol Bay for several years and then there were the "rookies" like Ball had their work cut out for them to learn the ropes in Bristol Bay.

Ball said he learned a lot in a short amount of time about the fishery, and the enforcement demands needed to properly regulate it. ■



**Members of the Alaska Wildlife Troopers who conducted sport fishing enforcement in Southcentral Alaska for the first part of the AWT enforcement efforts this summer get together for a picnic at Lake Lucille in June.**