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St. Mary Angler Guide Service: a review of the 2017 fishing season.

Overview of the Conditions.

Last winter brought us a snowpack across the mountains of S.E. British Columbia that was way above normal, a significant change from the last couple of years. As of May 15th the snowpack in the East Kootenay region, which includes the St. Mary, Elk, Bull and Skook rivers, was 157% of 'normal'. Over in the West Kootenays, where we fish the upper Columbia River, it was 156% of the long term average. The high snow levels did make us ponder the possibility of some localized flooding come spring. However, a prolonged cool spring meant a delay in the onset of the snow melt season by about two weeks and the freshet did not come all at once. It also left us with a lot of ground water that came in handy later in the summer.

Temperatures across the southern half of British Columbia were 1 to 3 C° below average from December thru March. While most of the winter was pretty dry in the B.C., the snowpack really built up in March right thru into May. Precipitation levels in March were 150-200% of normal for S.E. British Columbia.

While the snowpack in our region was pretty high we didn't see any significant flooding during the spring runoff. That could not be said of the Okanagan Basin to our west, as well as other regions of B.C. to the north that saw a lot of high water and flood damage. By June 15th there was still a good amount of snow in the mountains of our region, but the runoff was not creating any problems.

In 2017 we experienced higher than average rainfall during the spring, but much lower than average precipitation during the summer. With the high snow pack and prolonged wet spring we started fishing the St. Mary and Elk rivers a few weeks later than 2016. The below average rainfall persisted from May through September.

In terms of air temperature in the East Kootenays, it was quite a bit warmer from May thru September. It was way hotter than usual in July and August where average daily maximums were 5.8C° and 4C° warmer than normal respectively. Fortunately, all that snow and spring rain really bolstered the groundwater conditions that paid off when things got really hot and dry late in the summer. All our rivers in the East Kootenays possessed good flows throughout the season providing excellent fishing conditions.

Over on the upper Columbia River the air temperature was also above normal from May through October. As the case in the East Kootenays, it was also a lot hotter than usual in July and August where average daily maximums were 5.9C° and 4.8C° warmer than normal

respectively. Rainfall was below usual from May thru September. These hot and dry conditions did not create any water temperature problems in the spring and fall when we fish for the big rainbows. In October we saw only an average amount of rainfall this year so fishing conditions remained very good. As this is a tailwater fishery, high water does not create any problems for us. The upper Columbia River is a robust and resilient piece of water and we experienced excellent fishing conditions throughout the 2017 season.

The fishing season on the upper Columbia started on schedule in mid April. We started the summer fishing season for wild Westslope Cutthroat on the St.Mary River in late June and we were on the Elk by mid July. We got to the Skookumchuck and Bull Rivers by late July. The season lasted almost into October on the St.Mary and Elk rivers. We fished the upper Columbia River with our fly and spey rods into late October.

2017 was a record year in B.C. for acres burned by wildfires in a season at over 1.2 million hectares. While most of the fires were located outside of our region in central B.C. from May thru July, it did come our way in August. We had a number of fires in our region that led to the partial closure to fishing of the St.Mary and Elk rivers. Fortunately for us, as a commercial operator we were granted continued access to the rivers and were able to safely take anglers out on the water to fish during the closure.

East Kootenay Temperature and Rainfall (Station 'Cranbrook A', B.C.):

Month	May	June	July	August	September	October
Temperature in 2017	20°C (68°F)	23°C (73.4°F)	32°C (90°F)	30°C (86°F)	22°C (72°F)	11°C (52°F)
Average Daily Max. Temperature (1981-2010)	17.9°C (64°F)	21.6°C (71°F)	26.2°C (79°F)	26.0°C (79°F)	19.9°C (68°F)	11.7°C (53°F)
Rainfall in 2017	29 mm (1.1 inch)	26 mm (1 in.)	5 mm (.2 in.)	4 mm (.16 in.)	7 mm (.28 in.)	26 mm (1 in.)
Average Monthly Rainfall (1981-2010)	46.1 mm (1.8 in.)	62.2 mm (2.45 in.)	38.3 mm (1.5 in.)	28 mm (1.1 in.)	31.3 mm (1.23)	20.8 mm (.82)

Columbia River Temperature and Rainfall (Station Castlegar, B.C.):

Month	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
Temperature in 2017 (Average Daily Max.)	14°C (57°F)	22°C (72°F)	26°C (79°F)	34°C (93°F)	33°C (91°F)	25°C (77°F)	13°C (54°F)
Average Daily Max.	15.3°C (60°F)	20°C (68°F)	23.6°C (74.5°F)	28.1°C (83°F)	28.2°C (83°F)	22°C (72°F)	12.9°C (55°F)

Temperature (1981-2010)							
Rainfall in 2017	87 mm (3.4 inches)	57 mm (2.25 in.)	32 mm (1.26 in.)	6 mm (.24 in.)	4 mm (.16 in.)	8 mm (.32 in.)	52 mm (2.1 in.)
Average Rainfall (1981-2010)	59.3 mm (2.33)	70.3 mm (2.77)	72.3 mm (2.84)	48.1 mm (1.89)	30.4 mm (1.2)	42.4 mm (1.67)	49.4 mm (1.94)

The Spring Season on the Upper Columbia River in the West Kootenays.

We fish the 35 mile stretch of the upper Columbia River from the confluence with the Kootenay River down to the Canada-U.S. Border. In 2017 this tailwater fishery provided our anglers with great fishing from mid April into late June. We fish the Columbia in a couple of ways. The first is from our custom built jet boat using dry flies, nymphs or streamers. The boat has plenty of unobstructed fishing space with a wide beam making it both comfortable and stable. We power up to where we want to fish, turn off the motor and row around the big eddies, or through the big runs. The second approach is to get out of the boat and wade in from the wide cobblestone shorelines and big gravel bars. From here we either cast dry flies using standard fly rods, or double handed spey rods.

The rainbow fishing on the Columbia is very productive from April through June. This spring the weather was a mixed bag ranging from snow and rain to sun. In general things were wetter than usual. We took our standard approach to spring fishing using streamers with a sinking line, as well as fly rods set up for nymphing. We carried dry fly rod setups in the event that a hatch popped off during the day. After powering to our destination of choice on the river we would cut the motor and do a controlled drift downstream; fishing along the bank edges and then sliding into the big back eddies of revolving water where we would fish the seams and feed lines. Later in the spring we did more fishing from shore with the spey rods.

Most of the fish landed this spring were in the 17 to 22 inch slot, with the average size increasing as the spring progressed. We also landed a nice assortment rainbows over 23 inches, including one over 26. Catch rates were also good this spring ranging from 10-20 per day depending on the anglers experience level. On April 1 the water flow on the Columbia was low to start with at around 64,000 cubic feet per second (CFS), exposing a good amount of shoreline, rock and cobble piers and big in-river gravel bars. By May 1 the flows were around 80,000 CFS. From May 1 to the end of June flows rose more steadily to around 115,000 CFS on May 15th to 150,000 CFS by June 1st. The higher flows result in a fuller channel with less exposed gravel bars and cobble shoreline, but bigger eddies. As flows increase through the spring the fish tend to move from along the banks and runs into the big back eddies.

The Columbia remained clear throughout the spring providing excellent fishing conditions. We also experienced the typical robust hatches of caddis, callibaetis and mayflies. When you throw your line into the Columbia you don't have any idea what size rainbow will take your fly, but you can be assured once it hits it will run and pull hard!

Summer Cutthroat Fishing on the St.Mary, Elk, Bull and Skookumchuck Rivers in the East Kootenays.

The St.Mary River was rounding into form by early July, weeks later than 2016 but more in line with what we usually see. On July 5th it was 35C° (95F°), the Stone Fly hatch was working it way up river and we were landing lots of cuts in the 13 to 15 inch slot. By mid July the River had shaped up very nicely and were catching the odd Bull Trout and Cut-bow in addition to loads of Westslope Cutthroats.

The Elk River was shaping up nicely by mid July, again more in line with what we usually see. On our first trip out in mid July it was in the high 20's C° (mid 80's F°), the water was clear and the flows were dropping nicely as we landed about 20 cutthroat in the 14 to 17 inch class. We also pursued a nice sized Bull Trout we spotted trailing a cutthroat. It hit the fly hard, fought well, but popped off at the net! It was a great float to start to the 2017 season on the Elk.

By late July the weather was hot with clear skies as the St.Mary, Elk and Bull rivers were coming into their summer groove. The rivers were crystal clear, had good flows and were loaded with cutthroats. We were now fishing all sections of the St.Mary and Elk. We were also seeing the first signs of the wildfires from central B.C. as the smoke was starting to move into our region. On a trip to the St.Mary on August 2nd we could see the grasshoppers were now everywhere and the Stone fly hatch was pretty well done. The anglers were experiencing good catch rates of cutthroat trout from the morning right through into the afternoon. The fishing over on the Elk was equally productive.

In August we started to see the effects of the dry summer as we had received very little rain since the beginning of June. On top of that it was turning out to be abnormally hot in August as well as July. The lack of rain and elevated temperatures meant we started seeing wild fires in our region of the Province. By early August we were fishing the Bull and making trips back into the Skookumchuck Canyon, as well as our daily floats on the St.Mary and Elk. On our August 21st float to the Elk we hit the water early to avoid the heat. We were rewarded with a good catch of cutties in the 14 to 16 slot as well as one that was around 18 inches in length. By now grasshoppers were everywhere along the banks, with the odd hatch of caddis and midges popping off. All that early season precipitation meant the flows in our rivers stayed up giving the fish lots of cool water even though it was very hot and dry.

By early September the wildfires were creating problems for anglers in our region. The Government decided to close access to the backcountry for 30 days, or until a change in the weather brought sustained moisture. Fortunately for us, they made exemptions on some of the rivers we fish. On the Elk River anglers were allowed to access the river to fish, or float from boat launches and private properties. On the St. Mary River guided anglers could access the river only through private properties. As we use drift boats and have secured private launching points for years now, our anglers could still get out on the water to fish.

At the same time the Elk and St. Mary rivers continued to fish very well. With less angler pressure as the result of Government closure we were seeing good catch rates of cuts in the 14 to 15 inch range. By mid month the restricted access was dropped as temperatures were cooling and we were seeing a little rain. We even had quite a bit of snow fall on the tops of the Rockies. We were also seeing more hatches of October Caddis, Blue Winged Olives and Green Drakes on the St. Mary and Elk rivers. The water levels in the rivers were getting into their September lows and we were landing a good number of cut-bows to go with the cutthroats. We were now starting to think about moving back over to the upper Columbia River to fish for the big rainbows.

All our East Kootenays rivers fished very well thru September as the water flows stood up and the fish continued to feed. As is always the case, there was much less angling pressure in September which left the rivers pretty well exclusively to us.

Fall Fishing for Big Rainbows on the Upper Columbia River.

In late September we headed back over to the Columbia River in search of the big rainbows. We packed up our customized jet boat that was designed specifically for the Columbia and hit the road for the month of October. The jet gets us around quickly on the water while the drift boat design elements allows us to row it so we can hover in the choice water.

The weather this year on the Columbia was its normal warm and dry. On our September 30th float the river was running clear at about 70,000 cubic feet per second (CFS). The weather was warm and clear, peaking at a comfortable 70°F (20°C). Within the first 15 minutes on the water we hooked into a nice, chunky rainbow; around 20 inches in length. This fish took off and ran us into the backing before we pulled over along the shore and landed this big guy. The rainbows fed well over the summer and were in very good shape and beautifully colored.

During this trip the guys landed 15 rainbow trout each. All were really good sized, between 18 to 23 inches. The fish were mainly taken on streamers, with only a few midges. October Caddis and Blue Winged Olives were hatching on the day. We spent most of the day floating along the bank edges. On occasion we would bank the boat and the anglers would get out to cast their spey rods. Certain runs on the Columbia are very conducive to spey fishing.

On our subsequent October trips we continued to fish mostly streamers, casting dry flies during the October Caddis and Blue Winged Olive hatches. We used the Spey rods for fishing on the wide exposed cobble shorelines. After early October the water flows in Columbia where turned down to about 35,000 CFS from the upstream dams. This opened up a lot more gravel bars and cobble shoreline and the river took on a more intimate feel. We continued to catch 15 to 20 rainbows per trip in the 18-24 inch range. The odd bigger fish at 25 plus was also hooked up. The fall colours on the wide expansive valley of the Columbia were beautiful. It was a great month of October fishing to close off the 2017 season.

Annual Hosted Trip to Christmas Island

In February of 2017 we hosted our annual fishing trip to the Republic of Kiribati, also known as Christmas Island. Christmas is a giant coral atoll located 1,300 miles south of the Hawaiian Islands, 100 miles north of the Equator. As the host, we made all the arrangements booking our group of 16 into the "Villages", a local lodge. The Villages features 8 air-condition double twin bed bungalows with private baths, comfortably accommodating our group. All our meals were prepared by local chefs and served onsite in the dining room.

Each day the head guide scheduled our daily fishing venue according to the tide and sun position. In the morning each group would leave the beach in their assigned skiff with their personal guide and boatman. Each angler had their own guide, so it is one on one, which is great for all fishers regardless of their level of skill.

On Christmas Island we fish for Bonefish and Giant Trevally (G.T.s). The guide carries your 12 weight rod while you fish for bonefish just in case a GT is sighted in your area. We use 8 weight rods for the bones. For those fishers who needed it, we put together a gear package with custom tied flies.

Our group caught between 10-30 bonefish a day with chances to catch GT's. We also caught different reef fish occasionally when we would go further out. Bonefish average 2-6 pounds, but several fish over 8 pounds were caught during the week. Many GT's were caught as well with the average size in the 5 to 8 pound range. That said, some of the guys were targeting the big GT's. The largest bonefish landed was 9 pounds while the biggest GT came in at around a whopping 50 pounds!

We are taking a group to Christmas Island again this February 21 to 28th, 2018. We still have 3 spots open so give us a call if you are interested in coming along. You will have a great time.

So there you have it, another year of great fishing with the St.Mary Angler is history. Thanks again to all those anglers we accompanied out on the water this year.

As always, we greatly appreciated the patronage of our guide service and the fly shop in Cranbrook, B.C. We wish everyone a healthy and enjoyable Holiday Season. We hope to see you in the shop, or out on the river again next year.

We will be attending tradeshow in Washington, Oregon and Colorado in the New Year. We are now booking people into the 2018 and 2019 seasons. If you have an interest in coming along with us to Christmas Island, or wish to book a trip to any of the rivers we float in B.C., feel free to give us a call to discuss details.

Feel free to contact us anytime via our email or at 1-800-667-2311. We are always eager to talk about the fishing and be sure to follow us at the Facebook link below.

Take care,

Kelly & Karen

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PS To find out which tradeshow we will be attending in early 2018, go to <http://www.stmaryangler.com/tradeshows.html> for dates, locations and to contact us for will call tickets if you will be attending. To learn more about the rivers we fish check out <http://www.stmaryangler.com/riverft.html>.