

2023 Smelt Run



Smelt Dipping Returns to the Sandy River

By Kevin Mooney

Troutdale was able to revisit a page out of the history books in March 2023. For the first time since 2015, smelt returned to the Sandy River in enough numbers to allow for dipping.

For generations, eulachon smelt would periodically return to the Sandy River in March or April to spawn. Their return was sporadic and part of the fun was guessing when they might return. When they did, it would draw thousands of people to the river to what is now Glenn Otto Park to scoop the silvery fish out of the river with dipnets.

This year's return prompted the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to open the fishery on a limited basis for a brief 7-hour window on Thursday, March 30, with a limit put in place of 10 pounds of smelt per person.

Dippers began gathering on the riverbank a few hours before the fishing window opened to find the perfect spot. When the clock ticked to noon, the dipping began - and people quickly hit their limits.

A Troutdale tradition

City Councilor Glenn White remembers Troutdale's smelt runs as an exciting event that has always brought the community and neighbors together.

"My family has carried on the late Glenn Otto's tradition of renting smelt nets," White says. "We bought his old Troutdale home in 1990."

The community spirit among people on the riverbank was palpable. There were people from a wide variety of cultures, and you could hear numerous languages and see wide smiles among every person, young and old.

"This event is very multicultural which adds to the fun," White says. "People come from other cities that have their past stories and fond memories. In the past I have talked to people as far as Canada, Montana and California coming specifically for the Sandy River smelt run. They come because they have done it before and have special memories. Some remember doing it as a child with their parents and grandparents."

"It's so much fun watching families dip for smelt for the first time," he adds. "Our daughter-in-law got to experience Sandy River smelting for her first time this year with our son. They laughed and had a great time trying to scoop up fish while watching others."

To smoke... or to fry

One of the first questions people new to the experience ask is... what exactly do you do with all that fish? In the past, the oily fish could be dried and burned like a candle – hence it's "candlefish" nickname. More recently, entrepreneurs and commercial harvesters would sell their catch to be used as fertilizer or as feed for animals.

But many dippers on the riverbank insist that smelt are delicious – if you know what you are doing. Some dippers described throwing them in the smoker, others mentioned pan frying. Michael Chin of Portland admitted that he didn't really know how to prepare his catch. His solution? "I just give them to my mom and she does all the cooking!"

White proudly states that after asking the long-time dippers how they prepare their smelt, he developed the best recipe and technique for cooking smelt. He uses dry batter and fries the fish whole – guts included – in peanut oil. After cooking he seasons them with sea salt and pulls from the head to get two perfectly cooked filets. He stresses that you **HAVE** to eat the tails. They taste like shrimp. (You can find his recipe below)

Saving Smelt for the Future

Despite this year's return, smelt runs have been fewer and farther in between since the heady days of the early to mid 20th century. In 2010 eulachon smelt were listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Since then, populations have grown, and eulachon smelt are

occasionally available for recreational harvest – like this year.

White recalls that previous smelt runs lasted for more than a week and people would dip throughout the night. “Older folk reminisce about the size of the past smelt runs. I have witnessed the banks and the whole Sandy River being full of smelt,” he said.

“Each spring we look at the Sandy River in anticipation and wonder if the smelt will return,” White says. “I’m hoping through the conservation efforts, that the smelt will return to the historical runs of the past.”

*Visit the city’s [Facebook page](#) to see more photos from the 2023 smelt run. You can learn more about Troutdale’s smelt runs at Troutdale Historical Society’s [Barn Exhibit Hall](#) at 732 E Historic Columbia River Highway. This article originally appeared in the [May/June 2023 edition](#) of *The Troutdale Champion*.*

Glenn White’s fried smelt recipe

Ingredients: Whole smelt, peanut oil, Pride of the West batter mix, sea salt

Heat peanut oil in a cast iron pan to 400-425 degrees.

Roll whole smelt in “Pride of the West” batter mix.

Flash cook the smelt until they curl up like a potato chip.

Place cooked fish on a wire rack and sprinkle with sea salt.

Grab the head and pull it back and the bones come out in one easy motion.

Be sure to eat the tail – it’s the best part!







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