

Over the course of the last two coho seasons, the author has had great success with this color selection of Soft Beads.



# Neutrally BUOYANT BEADS for COHO

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT HAUGEN



Bead fishing for coho continues to grow in popularity, and with gear always advancing, anglers are finding more success.



Fishing beads for coho is a great way to cover water, results in fewer hang-ups versus other methods, and they can be presented multiple ways.

“I don’t think the fish are in here yet,” I muttered to my buddy as I reeled in my ninth cast in a row without so much as a bite. We were fishing a classic silver salmon hole on a clear river on the Alaska Peninsula. It was early morning; we were 23 miles from saltwater and the tide should have brought in a fresh push of coho.

“I’m switching to a spinner,” my buddy noted, while I committed to trying a different style of bead. My buddy had been fishing a hard bead; me a large, rubber bead with the consistency of a super ball. I switched to a Soft Bead, and on the first cast, latched into a thick, bright coho. My partner helped me tail the salmon in some tall grass. By the time he unhooked the fish and started bleeding it, I made another cast and immediately hooked another salmon.

Five casts, five coho. All were big, bright fish, complete with sea lice. I handed my buddy the rod, and he switched bead colors. He still used a Soft Bead but

switched from cerise to a mottled orange bead and proceeded to pick up where I left off. Soon he had his five-fish limit.

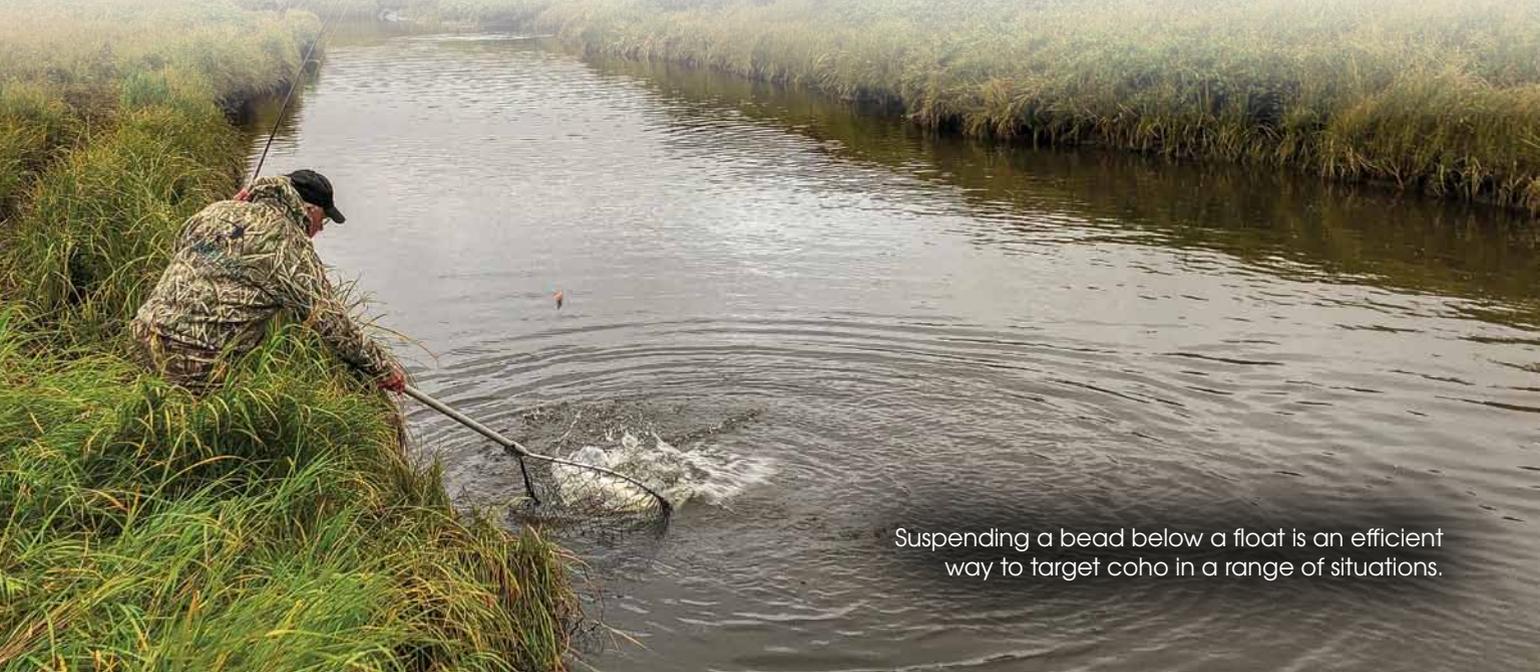
Sitting on the riverbank, enjoying a gorgeous sunrise, we started talking, and thinking, like all anglers would. “Why didn’t we touch a salmon with the first two styles of beads we used, then all of a sudden catch fish as fast as we could throw it out?” Obviously, the salmon were there, they just didn’t bite.

Catching coho isn’t rocket science, especially in Alaska. But they can be finicky fish at times, and they can suddenly quit biting. Usually such an abrupt shutdown is the result of excessive fishing pressure or sunlight penetrating the water and forcing the fish deeper or into different holding water. Rarely, however, have I seen it where I’ve been the first angler into a hole and not caught coho right away, then switched terminal gear and caught fish in the exact spot. Coho are typically very aggressive in the early morning, after having spent the

night migrating long sections of river. But, as with all fishing, nothing is ever a guarantee, not even when it comes to an early morning coho bite.

The only difference my buddy and I could conclude was the beads we caught all the coho on were neutrally buoyant, whereas the other beads sunk. Though the water we fished was only 8- to 10 feet deep, apparently the first beads we fished traveled along the bottom of the river, below where the coho were holding. We figured the current flow was swift enough in the riffle that the coho would be holding closer to the bottom, but we were wrong.

Once we drifted BnR Soft Beads through the hole, that’s when the bites came. Since that experience, I’ve fished coho using a range of beads, in multiple rivers throughout Alaska, and continue to learn something every time out. While many great beads on the market perform well, when it comes to a range of water conditions in which I’ve consistently



Suspending a bead below a float is an efficient way to target coho in a range of situations.

caught the most coho, the Soft Beads have been my top performer. No, I've not tried every single brand of bead on the market—but I've tried a lot—and no, BnR Tackle doesn't pay me to endorse them. My job, and I feel, my responsibility as a full-time outdoor writer is to learn how to effectively catch fish and share my findings with fellow anglers.

What I've concluded with the Soft Beads is their neutral buoyancy keeps them in the strike zone. Their soft texture is also appealing to fish. I've done extensive underwater camera work with coho in many Alaskan streams, and have learned a lot. Twenty years ago, I thought coho primarily held tight to the bottom in faster moving water, but camera studies have revealed them to suspend much of the time. What this means is a presentation that can stay suspended longer through the drift can have the advantage in producing strikes.

Think of some of the most effective ways coho are caught. Spinners are cast and retrieved through suspended water, jigs are twitched through prime holding water, and jigs and bait fished beneath a float can ride high off the bottom, where coho hold. Get beads in this same target water, and bite ratios increase.

When drifting Soft Beads, I use just enough sinker to occasionally tick the bottom. I don't want to dredge the bottom and risk getting hung up throughout the drift because that puts the bead below the silvers. I also don't want the sinker never hitting the bottom, as this will allow the bead to float too high, above the salmon.

Soft Beads float when put in water by themselves. Add a 1/0 or 2/0 hook, and the bead becomes neutrally buoyant. By adjusting leader length and the amount of sinker being used, you can control just how often the terminal gear ticks the bottom based on current speed and water depth.

As for bead sizes, when it comes to coho, bigger is better. Alaska's coho are aggressive, and a 20 mm bead is easy for them to inhale. The 14 mm beads are as small as I'll go for coho, with 16 mm to 20 mm being preferred. Some of my buddies love fishing 25 mm beads for coho, not just king salmon.

When it comes to Soft Bead colors for coho, my top four producers have been Sweet Pink Cherry, Clown, Cerise, and Mottled Pink. As with most coho, you can't go wrong with pink, pink, or pink. I'm also a fan of natural-orange colors that match fresh roe.

Bobber dogging with beads is also very effective, either from shore or a boat. The key, again, is to keep the sinker

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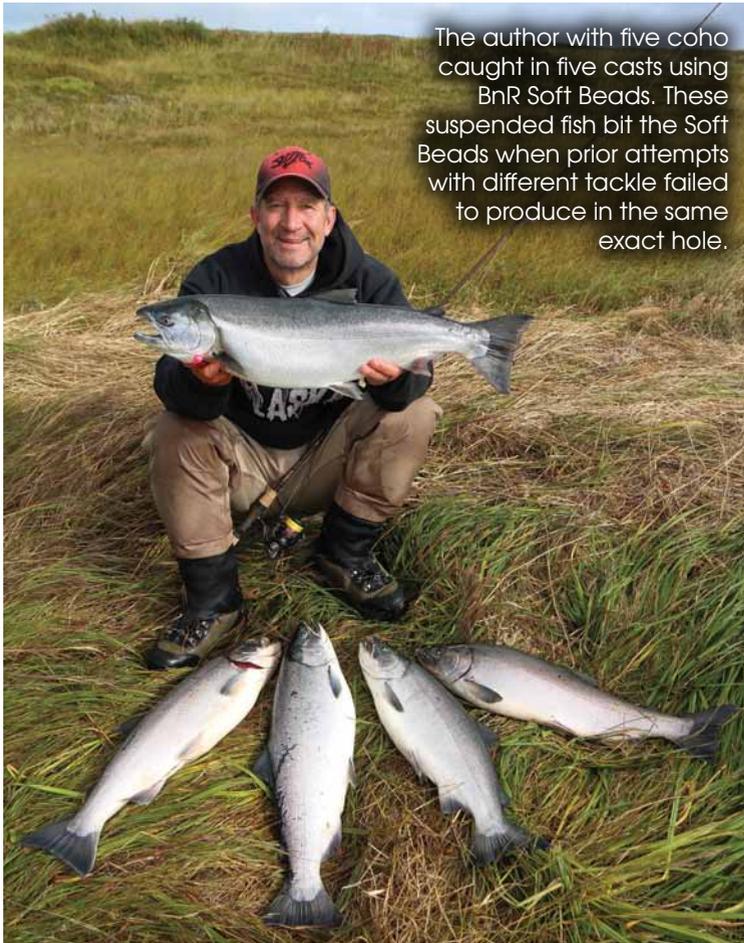
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The author with five coho caught in five casts using BnR Soft Beads. These suspended fish bit the Soft Beads when prior attempts with different tackle failed to produce in the same exact hole.

occasionally tapping the bottom, allowing the bead to stay up in the strike zone. To maximize the efficiency of this presentation, I've found Beau Mac's Bobber Doggin' floats to be outstanding. Their unique shape allows optimal speed control based on current speed and line drag, and the internal structure prevents braided line from cutting through the center of this inline float.

Beads can also be fished effectively beneath a regular float. If using a hard bead that sinks, simply adjust the float so the bead rides in the strike zone. If using neutrally buoyant beads, again, adjust the float and use the right amount of weight to get the bead traveling where you want it.

Another friend of mine loves bead fishing for salmon and steelhead, and when fishing beads beneath a float, always rigs them in tandem where legal. His reasoning is that no matter what bead the bite comes on (top or bottom), having two beads creates not only more visibility, but more movement, and movement attracts fish. He rigs a 20 mm bead on the top hook, and a 14 mm bead on the trailing hook that's 18- to 30 inches back.

I've also had good success stacking beads on top of one another, with the larger bead on the bottom, smaller bead on top. With this scenario you can experiment with bead color combinations based on river conditions and water clarity.

A revolution for fishing Soft Beads came last fall, in the form of the new T-Stop. "Outside the making of the original Soft Bead, the T-Stop is the biggest thing we've done," shares Brandon Wedam, owner of BnR Tackle. "Pegging Soft Beads wasn't easy for folks, and we worked

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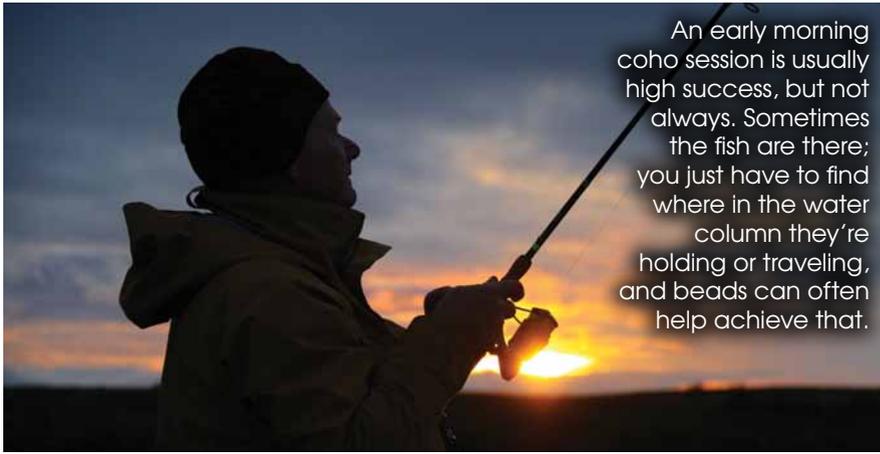






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An early morning coho session is usually high success, but not always. Sometimes the fish are there; you just have to find where in the water column they're holding or traveling, and beads can often help achieve that.

Fishing hard beads on the bottom, he caught multiple coho. His reasoning, "I felt the coho were there the whole time, it's just that with all the catching we were doing I figured it pushed the rest of the fish down deeper, so I went with a presentation I could fish on the bottom."

The beauty of the bead is the variety of ways it can be fished. Be it suspended beneath a float, dragged, bounced, bobber-dogged, backbounced, drifted, even run behind a diver, the diversity of beads makes them ideal for anglers traveling throughout Alaska. Beads are small, lightweight, and easy to pack, making them perfect for remote fishing journeys, too.

If looking to expand your coho fishing arsenal, consider the bead. If desiring to build a complete bead fishing setup, think about hard beads as well as soft beads, because when it comes to catching coho, they all have a place.



*For signed copies of Scott Haugen's best-selling book, Flyfisher's Guide To Alaska, and many other titles, visit [scotthaugen.com](http://scotthaugen.com). Follow Scott on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.*

for a year and a half to perfect the T-Stop. It now comes in different sizes and colors, and anglers are loving them."

I've used the T-Stops on Soft Beads ranging in size from 10 mm to 20 mm, and they're a game changer. Beads are now easy and quick to rig, hold in place when being fished, and won't pull over the stops when fighting fish. The extra-large T-Stops have a large surface which is ideal for fishing the 16 mm to 20 mm Soft Beads.

While fishing another remote river in southwest Alaska, a buddy came jogging down the bank toward me. "Do you have any more of those beads? I just lost mine,"

he panted, catching his breath. "I've hooked seven coho in the last eight casts, and the last one broke me off," he excitedly related. "These fish are hammering the bead way better than the spinners I'd been using. I want to take some of these back to Washington with me to fish on the Peninsula," he made clear, holding up and shaking the Soft Bead I'd just handed him.

On another recent trip, a group of three anglers fished jigs and spinners through a hole late in the morning. Once the bite turned off, two of the guys moved to new water. The third member of the party, not wanting to leave the hole, re-rigged.

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