

Up North: Chapter Seven - The Sporting Life

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September 7, 2016



The Village of Ouzinkie on Spruce Island, Alaska

One thing about sports fishing, whether it is big game fish or little ole' sun fish in a pond is the mystery of what goes on under the water. One time while fishing for halibut off of Kodiak the veil was pieced for me. We were in a twenty eight foot open boat in early September. It was a beautiful fall day and we had left the dock around 8:30 A.M. with four Korean university professors on board. Our destination was Wale Island and the trip would take us past Spruce Island and the Village of Ouzinkie. It was about a forty minute run in good weather.

We were planning to drift through the narrow passages between the various islands during the flood tide and score some world class halibut fishing. We spent the flood first drifting past Raspberry Island and then along Wale Island. We caught a few fish but not what we expected. By mid-afternoon we were in Marmot Bay sixty yards off Wale Island, having a little lunch and slowly drifting along the Island. The bottom was sandy with frequent rock up-crops. Close in we drifted along the three fathom curve and tried to keep our gear from getting hung up on the rocks. Nearby was a community of sea otters going about their business, floating on their backs in the sun shine and diving for clams. It was easy to watch them forever.

You may think that tropical waters are clear but the clearest waters I've ever seen were right here in Alaska. We could look down eighteen feet and see, clear as day, the bottom passing under the boat and our halibut rigs with a lead ball and two baited hooks slowly bouncing over the bottom.

Now a halibut's coloring of green and brown irregular markings are designed by nature to look like the bottom but they could be spotted by watching the movement. As I stared at the bottom I could see my lead ball and gently bounce it. Low-and-behold there it was, a halibut moving towards my baits. The fish nudged and bumped the bait and I felt the corresponding bumps and jerks on my rod, reel and line. Next the shadowy form moved to and covered the bait. Seeing clearly I let out more line and waited. Then the fish backed off and suddenly took the bait in its mouth. I waited, waited, waited and with no guess work yanked the line and set the hook. The fish arched its spine, jerked its head and tried to dislodge the hook. The fight was on. In the next twenty minutes as I cranked the slab up I was able to see everything in the clear water. The fish weighed in at 163 pounds and the experience was nothing short as enlightening.

On my first halibut trip I had a premier experience that I always remembered and tried to recreate for as long as I fished the Kodiak waters. A group of eight adventurers flew out of Kodiak on two float planes headed for the wilderness island of Shuyak. A fisherman, homesteading couple and local legends Red and Debbie Lataski were our hosts and guides. After landing in the small bay outside of Red's place we spent about an hour over coffee and a tour of the homestead then we boarded Red's fifty two foot homemade gill net boat with Debbie at the helm to catch some halibut. Red was in a eighteen foot Boston Whaler leading the way.

The plan was to get into the channel between Shuyak and the Kodiak main land as the tide turned. According to Red as the tide rushed through the narrow channel it would bring not only a huge volume of water but also hordes of the flat fish we were hunting. The plan worked like a charm. Both vessels arrived about two hours into the flood and the sea water was rushing through with visible force. We were in the right place at the right time. Debbie guided the boat to a spot near the channel opening and threw it into neutral and the bonanza began.

As fast as we could drop baited hooks into the swirling waters the telltale jerk on the line would announce another fish on. We were all using a rig with two and a half inch circle hooks and often when cranked up had not one but two fish on. There were plenty of 'chickens' in the fifty to hundred pound range but also many bigger fish were hauled onboard. Six of us worked at it, and it was work, for more than two hours till the boat's hold was nearly full. Finally it was decided that we had enough and we were done. The boat dropped us off to meet the float plane and began the eight hour run back to Kodiak with the days catch. In time I was to learn that although often recalled and talked about it was a once in a life time thing.

Sports fishing for salmon is not only a big tourist draw every summer but also a favorite of residents. Hooking a salmon and then successfully landing it is a thrill. One way is to stand on the banks of one of several local rivers and cast flies, bait or lures. Like anything else skill and experience always improves the experience. My own experience was that standing on a river bank in late August or early September involved a lot off swatting mosquitoes and casting into trees. A competent guide always helps.

I spent one winter working on the dock crew with just about the best sports fishing guide in Kodiak, Chris Fiala. Ah well, everybody has to make a living. Angling was Chris's life. Don't know if he was a naturally born fisherman but he lived and breathed it when I knew him and so of course he was good at it. Not only was his skill, knowledge and technique good he was enthusiastic and so was a great guide. His love for fishing predated his arriving in Kodiak but he found himself in his natural environment and has thrived there.

After more than a couple years fishing and surviving on the rock he was able to put together a deal and buy the U-Rascal, a forty three foot charter boat. The vessel could carry the captain a mate and eight clients and Chris could pretty much always put them on the fish. Of course there was lots of different fish to go after but Chris's specialty was trolling for ocean kings. I went out with him twice and was not disappointed.

All salmon are things of beauty; sleek, muscular and when in salt water, silver bright. The largest of the five Pacific salmon species, the King or Chinook salmon is by far the most magnificent and they put up a hell of a fight for the angler. The trick was to hook up with one on the open ocean. Chris knew how to do it and was consistently able to give the folks that went out with him the experience of a life time.

Trolling for kings requires specific equipment and tackle. The U-Rascal had it all. The basics were a medium weight rod and an open reel. There were also six down-riggers onboard. These allowed the bait to be set at specific depths to attract any kings swimming by. The reels were set up with forty pound test monofilament line for the sporting experience. The business end was rigged with a four inch shiny lure and tandem hooks for bait. The hooks were usually baited with herring. There were variations but this outfit fit the bill under most conditions.

The day Chris took me and two other guys out it was late September, the weather was overcast and blustery. We left the dock around ten thirty. Chris was no early riser. He didn't need to be. It was only a twenty minute run out to the spot off Chiniak rock where Chris had been slaying them over the past week. On the run out we sat in the galley, drank coffee and shot the shit. The mate was at the wheel and Chris leaned casually against the port rail gazing at the sky and sea, occasionally shouting instructions up to the wheel house.

When the wheel guy backed down the engines we knew that we had arrived and we lost no time in piling out to the back deck to hook us a king. The mate kept the wheel and the captain gave him a heading and a landmark to steer for. Chris then helped us set up the down-riggers and bait the hooks. Once we were all in the water at the recommended depth the troll commenced. After turning into the breeze the sea conditions changed and the boat began a stomach churning roll. Some of the guys quieted down and started to look a little green around the gills. At the end of the first forty minute troll without a strike we cranked up the baits and ran back to the starting point. On the second troll we caught a nice halibut and a star fish. Not what we were looking for. Troll number three didn't pan out either and Chris glassed the sea further out for birds and or jumpers. It was time to make a move.

I don't know what he saw but we moved another half mile off shore and set out the baits again. Further off shore the roll became worse and worse and the always ready skipper asked if anybody wanted a patch to put behind the ear. I took two. Seasick is no fun.

Back and forth we worked the ocean and finally Ted hooked up. His line snapped off the down rigger and by the angel of his line and the bend of his pole it was clear he had a king on. With a little coaching he cranked it in. It was gaffed and landed. Looked to be forty pounds plus. An air of optimism that only a fish on board can induce returned. Within ten minutes me and Neil also had fish on. My fish didn't come up without a fight and I put my back into it. At one point my line went slack and I figured the fish had thrown the hook. I kept cranking and the weight on the line came back and the darn thing even ran one more time. When the head popped up Chris was watching and shouted that it was a big one. I couldn't really tell. With a little assistance with the gaff I got it into the boat. It was biggish maybe over sixty pounds and flopping like a big fish out of water. It took three whacks with the ball bat to settle it down. It was a beauty. Back at the dock it weighed out at sixty-seven pounds.

We trolled for three more hours and everybody caught at least one king, some guys got three and nobody puked, surely a good day fishing. On the run back in the seas laid down and we ate the lunch we had packed and had no stomach for before. At weigh in I had the biggest fish but everyone was satisfied. Thanks Chris. And in case you are wondering this ain't no fish story.

Fishing is a little like playing golf or shooting pool, the more you do it the better you get. I continued to fish whenever possible until I left the island and did get better at it but never reached the lofty heights of some. Funny thing is, since I left the island more than twenty years ago, I have yet to get a line wet.